Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION

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Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION

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Annual Report

AS AN investor in GALAXY *Science Fiction* to the extent of buying it, you are naturally entitled to our first fiscal statement to stockholders.

● *Stories.* In twelve consecutive issues, this magazine has presented well over 750,000 words, chosen from considerably more than 25,000,000, which reduces to about five dozen stories selected from something like 3,000. It is doubtful if any other science fiction magazine has had as many manuscripts submitted to it in the same space of time.

● *Reader Reaction.* All stories were liked by some and disliked by others. Every story, however, was liked more than it was disliked. None was universally approved, which sounds bad but isn't — you may remember that Mark Twain had to visit a friend in the poor house, a publisher who put out a newspaper that everybody agreed with.

Unless a science fiction magazine has an arrogant editor, or is committed to a specific type of story, it must use a variety of themes. Some of them will, of course, be your favorites, a few you tolerate, and others you don't care for at all. What many readers seem not to realize is that this is true of editors also.

But it would be foolish to mention my own preferences. In the first place, I would be swamped with those themes; in the second, my preferences are less important than the editorial balance of the magazine; and, finally, readers in general are tolerant enough to know that themes they did not enjoy would be enjoyed by other readers. As long as they find more pleasurable than unpleasurable stories in each issue, they will continue to support GALAXY *Science Fiction.*

● *Letters.* The habitually non-participating fans, after an unprecedented mail response to the first half dozen issues, have abandoned the field to the active fans. These, for all their valuable support, create confusion with their special demands. It would be a great help to have the usually inactive fans clarify matters with a renewed flood of letters. A specific point is that, with the completion of our first year, this page is readying the readers' story ratings for Vol. 2. You'll want your vote counted, surely.

● *Production.* At one point, we ran into the paper shortage and really had to scrounge to put out the magazine. In this we had

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some very distinguished publishing company, including big and powerful book and magazine houses. We now have a long-term contract and are assured of uninterrupted production. However, we have to make up delayed issues—though none, if you'll notice, was skipped—a few days or a week at a time. In about two or three months, we will hold to the 15th as a deadline.

There may be some temporary difficulties until we have our presswork problems ironed out. Just to complicate things for ourselves and our new printer, we are, in the meantime, trying a layout technique gorily termed a *gutter bleed*. The two inside margins connecting facing pages are called the gutter in printing, and a bleed is the carrying of an illustration all the way to the edge of the page. You've seen it used in slick magazines, but never in science fiction. The result will be more attractive makeup, once we get it fully under control.

Also, notice the change of type? It is bolder, rounder, and more readable. Its name is Bookman, and it is one of the handsomest type faces available today.

o *Distribution.* A magazine's biggest headache. So many titles are published that the newsstand has become a battleground. But a science fiction magazine has one enormous advantage—its readers, acting as unofficial salesmen, hound dealers into giving the books display. Then, again, when copies are hard to find in some towns, readers let us know and we can order American News to correct the situation. This works to your advantage, because the more we sell, the more improvements we can introduce. And if that's not enough, the neighborly help wins our overwhelming gratitude.

To recapitulate, GALAXY has shown a steady increase of 5% a month from the first issue. When the price was raised to 35c with the May issue, there was a 7% drop, but the succeeding issues are quickly making up the temporary decline. In other words, GALAXY is solidly established and well over on the black side of the ledger. That, for a magazine only a year old, is a remarkable accomplishment, which could not have been achieved without superior quality — and, equally important, the enthusiastic support of readers.

o *Subscriptions.* According to the best available information, GALAXY has *several times as many subs as any other science fiction magazine!* So many, in fact, that we have had to turn this end of the business over to a mailing house, being unable to handle it ourselves. There have been some errors, which we are anxious to

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correct. If you've had any difficulty, please let us know immediately, and include all possible information.

● *Raw Materials.* The best authors and artists are submitting their best work to us in enormous quantity, thus guaranteeing that the quality of GALAXY will be maintained and even improved. In the changeover from one printer to another, there has been a delay in reporting on stories. Any authors who have been inconvenienced by this may be assured that it is not our standard practice.

● *Dividends.* Out of the 60 stories in GALAXY this past year, more than 30 are scheduled for anthologization, which indicates a high quality of product.

All in all, it's been a fine year.

—H. L. GOLD

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The Puppet Masters

By ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

Illustrated by Don Sibley

FOR me it started too early on July 12, 2007, with my phone shrilling. The sort of phone my section uses is not standard; the audio relay was buried surgically under the skin back of my left ear—bone conduction, and skull lifting.

"All right," I growled. "I hear you. Shut off that damned noise."

"Emergency," a voice said in my ear. "Report in person to the Old Man. At once."

"Moving," I acknowledged and sat up with a jerk that hurt my eyeballs. I went into the bath, injected a grain of "Gyro" into my arm, then let the vibro exer-

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cise machine shake me apart while the drug put me together. I stepped out a new man, or at least a good mockup of one, and got my jacket.

There is one thing no head of a country can know and that is: how good is his intelligence system? He finds out only by having it fail him. Hence our section. Security suspenders *and* belt, you might say. United Nations had never heard of us, nor had Central Intelligence—I think. All I really knew about us was the training I had received and the jobs the Old Man sent me on. Interesting jobs if you don't care where you sleep, what you eat, nor how long you live. If I had had any sense, I'd have quit and taken a regular job.

The only trouble with that would be that I wouldn't have been working for the Old Man any longer. That made the difference.

Not that he was a soft boss. He was capable of saying, "Boys, we need to fertilize this tree. Jump in that hole at its base and I'll cover you up."

We'd have done it. Any of us would. And the Old Man would bury us alive, too, if he thought there was a 53% probability that it was the Tree of Liberty he was nourishing.

He got up and limped toward me as I came into our section offices through a washroom booth in MacArthur Station. His face split in a wicked smile. His big hairless skull and his strong Roman nose made him look like a cross between Satan and Punch's Judy. "Welcome, Sam," he said. "Sorry to get you out of bed."

The deuce he was sorry! "I was on leave," I answered shortly.

"Ah, but you still are. We're going on a vacation."

"So my name is 'Sam'," I answered, deliberately ignoring his "vacation" crack. "What's my last name?"

"Cavanaugh. And I'm your Uncle Charlie—Charles M. Cavanaugh, retired. Meet your sister Mary."

I had been aware that there was another person in the room, but when the Old Man is present he gets full attention as long as he wants it. Now I looked over my "sister" and then looked her over again. It was worth it.

I could see why he had set us up as brother and sister if we were to do a job together; it would give him a trouble-free pattern. An indoctrinated agent can't break his assumed character any more than a professional actor can intentionally muff his lines. So this one I must treat as my sister—a dirty trick if I ever met one!

A long, slender body, but pleas-

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ingly mammalian. Good legs. Broad shoulders for a woman. Flaming, wavy red hair and the real red-headed saurian bony structure to her skull. Her face was handsome rather than beautiful; she looked me over as if I were a piece of furniture.

I wanted to drop one wing and run in circles. It must have showed, for the Old Man said gently, "Tut, tut, Sammy. Your sister dotes on you and you are extremely fond of her, but in a healthy, clean-cut, sickeningly chivalrous, All-American-Boy way."

"As bad as that?" I asked.

"Worse."

"Oh, well—Howdy, Sis."

She stuck out a hand. It was firm and seemed as strong as mine. "Hi, Bud." Her voice was deep contralto, which was all I needed. Damn the Old Man!

"I might add," he went on, "that you are so devoted to Mary that you would gladly die to protect her. I dislike telling you so, Sammy, but your sister is a *leetle* more valuable — for the present, at least—to the organization than you are."

"Got it," I acknowledged. "Thanks for the qualification."

"Now, Sammy—"

"She's my favorite sister; I protect her from dogs and strange men. All right, when do we start?"

"Better stop over in Cosmetics. They have a new face for you."

"Make it a whole new head. See you. 'By, Sis."

THEY did not quite do that, but they did fit my phone under the back of my skull and then cement hair over it. They dyed my hair to the same shade as that of my newly acquired sister, bleached my skin, and did things to my cheekbones and chin. The mirror showed me to be as good a redhead as Sis. I looked at my hair and tried to recall what its natural shade had been, way back when. Then I wondered about Sis. I hoped she was what she seemed to be.

I put on the kit they gave me and somebody handed me a jump bag already packed.

The Old Man had been in Cosmetics, too; his skull was now covered by crisp curls of a shade between pink and white. They had done something to his face, I could not tell just what—but we were all three clearly related by blood and of that curious subrace, the redheads.

"Come, Sammy," he said. "I'll brief you in the car." We went by a route I had not known about and ended up on the Northside launching platform, high above New Brooklyn and overlooking the ruins of Manhattan Crater.

I drove while the Old Man

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talked. Once we were out of local control, he told me to set it automatic on Des Moines, Iowa. I then joined Mary and "Uncle Charlie" in the lounge. He gave us our personal histories up to date. "So here we are," he concluded, "a merry family party—tourists. And if we should happen to run into unusual events, that is how we will behave, as nosy and irresponsible tourists."

"But what is the problem?" I asked. "Or do we play this one by ear?"

"Possibly."

"Okay. But when you're dead, it's nice to know why. Eh, Mary?"

"Mary" did not answer. She had that quality, rare in babes, of not talking when she had nothing to say.

"Sam, you've heard of 'Flying Saucers'," the Old Man said.

"Huh?"

"You've studied history."

"You mean *those?* The Flying Saucer craze, way back before the Disorders? I thought you meant something recent and real; those were mass hallucinations."

"Were they?"

"Well, I haven't studied much statistical abnormal psychology, but I seem to remember an equation. That whole period was psychopathic; a man with all his gaskets tight would have been locked up."

"Whereas this present day is sane, eh?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that." I pawed back through my mind and found the answer I wanted. "I remember that equation now — Digby's evaluating integral for second and higher order data. It gave a 93.7 percent certainty that the Flying Saucer myth, after elimination of explained cases, was hallucination. I remember it because it was the first case of its type in which the instances had been systematically collected and evaluated. A government project, though God knows why."

The Old Man looked benign. "Brace yourself, Sammy. We are going to inspect a Flying Saucer today. Maybe we'll even saw off a souvenir, like true tourists."

"SEVENTEEN hours," the Old Man glanced at his finger watch and added, "and twenty-three minutes ago, an unidentified spaceship landed near Grinnell, Iowa. Type unknown. Approximately disc-shaped and about one hundred and fifty feet across. Origin unknown, but—"

"Didn't they track a trajectory on it?" I interrupted.

"They did not," he answered. "Here is a photo of it taken by Space Station Beta after landing."

I looked it over and passed it

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to Mary. It was as unsatisfactory as a telephoto taken from five thousand miles out usually is. Trees looking like moss . . . a cloud shadow that loused up the best part of the pic . . . and a gray circle that might have been a disc-shaped ship and could just as well have been an oil tank or a water reservoir.

Mary handed the pic back. I said, "What else do we know?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? After seventeen hours? We ought to have agents pouring out of their ears!"

"We did have. Two within reach and four that were sent in. They failed to report back. I dislike losing agents, Sammy, especially with no results."

I had a sudden cold realization that the situation must be damned serious. The Old Man had chosen to bet his own brain against the loss of the organization—for he *was* the Section. I suddenly felt chilly. Ordinarily, an agent has a duty to save his own neck, in order to complete his mission and report back. On this job it was the Old Man who must come back, and, after him, Mary. I was as expendable as a paper clip.

"One agent made a partial report," the Old Man went on. "He went in as a casual bystander and reported by phone that it must be a spaceship. He then reported that the ship was opening and that he was going to try to get closer, past the police lines. The last thing he said was, 'Here they come. They are little creatures, about—' Then he shut off."

"Little men?"

" 'Creatures' was what he said."

"Peripheral reports?"

"Plenty. The Des Moines stereocasting station sent mobile units in for spot cast. The pictures they sent out were all long shots, taken from the air. They showed nothing but a disc-shaped object. Then, for about two hours, no pictures and no news, followed later by closeups and a new news slant."

I said, "Well?"

"The thing was a hoax. The 'spaceship' was a sheet metal and plastic fraud, built by two farm boys, in woods near their home. The fake reports originated with an announcer who had put the boys up to it to make a story. He has been fired and the latest 'invasion from outer space' turns out to be a gag."

"A hoax—but we lose six men. We going to look for them?"

"No. We would not find them. We are going to try to figure out why triangulation of this photograph—" he held up the teleshot taken from the Space Station—"doesn't quite jibe with the news reports, and why Des Moines stereo shut down for a while."

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Mary spoke up for the first time. "I'd like to talk with those farm boys."

I ROADED the car five miles this side of Grinnell and we started looking for the McLain farm — the news reports had named Vincent and George McLain as the culprits. It wasn't hard to find. At a fork in the road was a big sign: THIS WAY TO THE SPACESHIP. Shortly the road was parked both sides with duos and groundcars and triphibs. A couple of stands dispensed cold drinks and souvenirs at the turnoff into the McLain place. A state cop was directing traffic.

"Pull up," directed the Old Man. "Might as well see the fun, eh?"

"Right, Uncle Charlie," I agreed.

The Old Man bounced out, swinging his cane. I handed Mary out and she snuggled up to me, grasping my arm. She looked up at me, managing to look both stupid and demure. "My, but you're strong, Buddy."

I wanted to slap her. That poor-little-me routine from one of the Old Man's agents—a smile from a tiger.

"Uncle Charlie" buzzed around, bothering state police, buttonholing people, stopping to buy cigars at a stand, and giving a picture of a well-to-do, senile old fool, out for a holiday. He turned and waved his cigar at a state sergeant. "The inspector says it is a fraud, my dears — a prank thought up by boys. Shall we go?"

Mary looked disappointed. "No spaceship?"

"There's a spaceship, if you want to call it that," the cop answered. "Just follow the suckers. It's sergeant, not inspector."

We set out, across a pasture and into some woods. It cost a dollar to get through the gate and many turned back. The path through the woods was rather deserted. I moved carefully, wishing for eyes in the back of my head instead of a phone. Uncle Charlie and Sis walked ahead, Mary chattering like a fool and somehow appearing to be both shorter and younger than she had been on the trip out. We came to a clearing and there was the "spaceship."

It was more than a hundred feet across, but it was whipped together out of light-gauge metal and sheet plastic, sprayed with aluminum. It was the shape of two pie plates, face to face. Aside from that, it looked like nothing in particular. Nevertheless, Mary squealed, "Oh, how exciting!"

A youngster, eighteen or nineteen, with a permanent sunburn and a pimply face, stuck his head out of a hatch in the top of the

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monstrosity. "Care to see inside?" he called out. He added that it would be fifty cents apiece more and Uncle Charlie shelled out.

Mary hesitated at the hatch. Pimple face was joined by what appeared to be his twin and they started to hand her down in. She drew back and I moved in fast, intending to do any handling myself. My reasons were 99% professional; I could feel danger all through the place. "It's dark," she quavered.

"It's safe," the second young man said. "We've been taking sightseers through all day. I'm Vince McLain. Come on, lady."

Uncle Charlie peered down the hatch, like a cautious mother hen. "Might be snakes in there," he decided. "Mary, I don't think you had better go in."

"Nothing to fear," the first McLain said insistently. "It's safe."

"Keep the money, gentlemen." Uncle Charlie glanced at his finger watch. "We're late. Let's go, my dears."

I followed them back up the path, my hackles up until we reached the car. Once we were rolling, the Old Man said sharply, "Well, what did you see?"

I countered with, "Any doubt about that first report? The one that broke off?"

"None."

"That thing wouldn't have fooled an agent, even in the dark. This wasn't the ship he saw."

"Of course not. What else?"

"How much would you say that fake cost? New sheet metal, fresh paint, and from what I saw through the hatch, probably a thousand feet of lumber to brace it."

"Go on."

"Well, the McLain place had 'mortgage' all over it. If the boys were in on the gag, they didn't foot the bill."

"Obviously. You, Mary?"

"Uncle Charlie, did you notice how they treated me?"

"Who?" I said sharply.

"The state sergeant and the two boys. When I use the sweet-little-bundle-of-sex routine, something should happen. Nothing did."

"They were attentive," I objected.

"You don't understand. Something was wrong with them. Harem guards, if you know what I mean."

"Hypnosis?" asked the Old Man.

"Possibly. Or drugs, perhaps." She frowned and looked puzzled.

"Sammy, take the next turn to the left. We're investigating a point two miles south of here."

"The triangulated location by the pic?" I asked.

"What else?"

But we didn't get there. First it was a bridge out and I didn't

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have room enough to make the car hop it, aside from traffic regulations for a duo on the ground. We circled south and came in again, the only remaining route. We were stopped by a young highway cop. A brush fire, he told us; go any farther and we would probably be drafted into firefighting. He didn't know but what he ought to send me up to the firelines anyhow.

Mary waved her lashes at him and he relented. She pointed out that neither she nor Uncle Charlie could drive, a double lie.

After we pulled away, I asked her, "Harem guard?"

"Oh, my, no! A most attractive man."

Her answer annoyed me.

The Old Man vetoed taking to the air and making a pass over the spot. He said it was useless. We headed for Des Moines. Instead of parking at the toll gates, we paid to take the car into the city and ended up at the studios of Des Moines stereo. Uncle Charlie blustered our way into the office of the general manager. He told several lies — unless "Charles M. Cavanaugh" was actually a big wheel with the Federal Communications Authority. It wouldn't surprise me.

Once inside, he continued the Big Brass act. "Now, sir, what is this nonsense about a spaceship hoax? Speak plainly. Your license may depend on your answer."

The manager was a little round-shouldered man, but he did not seem cowed, merely irritated. "We've made full explanation over the channels," he said. "We were victimized. The man has been discharged."

"Hardly adequate, sir."

The little man—Barnes, his name was—shrugged. "What do you expect? Want us to string him up by his thumbs?"

Uncle Charlie pointed his cigar at him. "I warn you, sir, I am not to be trifled with. I am not convinced that two farm louts and a junior announcer could have pulled off this preposterous business. There was money in it. Yes, sir—money! Now tell me, just what did you—"

Mary had seated herself close by Barnes' desk. She had done something to her costume and her pose put me in mind of Goya's *Disrobed Lady*. She made thumbs-down to the Old Man.

Barnes should not have caught it; his attention appeared to be turned to the Old Man. But he did. He turned toward Mary and his face went dead. He reached for his desk.

"Sam! Kill him!" the Old Man rapped.

I burned his legs off and his trunk fell to the floor. It was a poor shot; I had intended to get him neatly.

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I stepped in and kicked his gun away from still-groping fingers. I was about to give him *coup de grace*—a man burned that way is dead, but it takes a while to die—when the Old Man snapped, "Don't touch him! Mary, stand back!"

He sidled toward the body, like a cat investigating the unknown. Barnes gave a long sigh and was quiet. The Old Man poked him gently with his cane.

"Boss," I said, "time to git, isn't it?"

Without looking around he answered, "We're as safe here as anywhere. This building may be swarming with them."

"Swarming with what?"

"How would I know? Swarming with whatever *he* was." He pointed at Barnes' body. "That's what I've got to find out."

Mary gave a choked sob and gasped, "He's still breathing. Look!"

The body lay face down; the back of the jacket heaved as if the chest were rising. The Old Man looked and poked at it with his cane. "Sam, come here." I came. "Strip it," he went on. "Wear gloves. And be careful."

"Booby trap?"

"Shut up. Use care."

He must have had a hunch that was close to truth. I think the Old Man's brain has a built-in integrator which arrives at logical necessity from minimum facts the way a museum Joe reconstructs an animal from a single bone. First pulling on gloves—agent's gloves; I could have stirred boiling acid, yet I could feel a coin in the dark and call heads or tails—I started to turn him over to undress him.

The back was still heaving. I did not like the look of it—unnatural. I placed a palm between the shoulderblades.

A man's back is bone and muscle. This was soft and undulating. I snatched my hand away.

Without a word, Mary handed me a pair of scissors from Barnes' desk. I took them and cut the jacket away. The body was dressed in a light singlet. Between this and the skin, from the neck halfway down the back, was something which was not flesh. A couple of inches thick, it gave the corpse an odd round-shouldered, slightly humped appearance.

It pulsed.

AS we watched, it slid off the back, away from us. I reached out to peel up the singlet, but my hand was knocked away by the Old Man's cane.

"Make up your mind," I said, and rubbed my knuckles.

He did not answer, but tucked his cane under the shirt and worried it up the trunk. The thing was uncovered.

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Grayish, faintly translucent, and shot through with darker structure, shapeless—but it was clearly alive. As we watched, it flowed down into the space between Barnes' arm and chest, filled it and stayed there, unable to go farther.

"Poor devil," the Old Man said softly.

"Huh? *That?*"

"No. Barnes. Remind me to see that he gets the Purple Heart, when this is over. If it ever is over." The Old Man straightened up and stumped around the room, as if he had forgotten completely the thing nestling in the crook of the dead man's arm.

I drew back and continued to stare at it, my gun ready. It could not move fast; it obviously could not fly; but I did not know what it could do. Mary pressed

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her shoulder against mine, as if for human comfort. I put my free arm around her.

On a side table there was a stack of cans, the sort used for stereo tapes. The Old Man took one, spilled out the reels and came back with it. "This will do, I think." He placed the can on the floor, near the thing, and began chivying it with his cane, trying to irritate it into crawling over the side and into the can.

Instead it oozed back until it was almost entirely under the body. I grabbed the free arm and heaved Barnes away; the thing clung, then flopped to the floor. Under Uncle Charlie's direction, Mary and I used our guns at lowest power to force it, by burning the floor close to it, into the can. We got it in, a close fit, and I slapped the cover on.

The Old Man tucked the can under his arm. "On our way, my dears."

He paused in the door to call out a parting, then, after closing the door, stopped at the desk of Barnes' secretary. "I'll be seeing Mr. Barnes tomorrow," he told her. "No, no appointment. I'll phone."

Out we went, slow march, the Old Man with the can full of thing under his arm and me with my ears cocked for alarums. Mary played the silly little moron, with a running monologue. The Old Man even paused in the lobby, bought a cigar, and inquired directions, with bumbling, self-important good nature.

Once in the car he gave directions, then cautioned me against driving fast. The directions led us into a garage. The Old Man sent for the manager and said, "Mr. Malone wants this car immediately." It was a signal I had had occasion to use myself; the

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duo would cease to exist in about twenty minutes, save as anonymous spare parts in the service bins.

The manager looked us over, then answered quietly, "Through that door over there." He sent the two mechanics out of the room and we ducked through the door.

WE ended up in the apartment of an elderly couple. There the Old Man got his bald head back, I acquired a mustache, and Mary looked as well dark as she had as a redhead. The "Cavanaugh" combination was dropped; Mary got a nurse's costume and I was togged out as a chauffeur while the Old Man became our elderly, invalid employer, complete with lap robe and tantrums.

A car was waiting for us. The trip back was no trouble; we could have remained the carrot-topped Cavanaughs. I kept the screen tuned to Des Moines, but, if the cops had turned up the late Mr. Barnes, the newsboys hadn't heard about it.

We went straight to the Old Man's office and there we opened the can. The Old Man sent for Dr. Graves, head of the Section's bio lab, and the job was done with handling equipment.

What we needed were gas masks, though. A stink of decaying organic matter filled the room and forced us to slap the cover on and speed up the blowers.

Graves wrinkled his nose. "What in the world was that?" he demanded.

The Old Man was swearing softly. "Find out," he said. "Work it in suits, in a germ-free compartment, and *don't* assume that it is dead."

"If that is alive, I'm Queen Anne."

"Maybe. Just don't take chances. It's a parasite, capable of attaching itself to a host, such as a man, and controlling the host. It is almost certainly extraterrestrial in origin and metabolism."

The lab boss sniffed. "Extraterrestrial parasite on a terrestrial host? Ridiculous! The body chemistries would be incompatible."

"When we captured it, it was living on a man. If that means it has to be a terrestrial organism, show me where it fits into terrestrial life-forms and where to look for its mates. And quit jumping to conclusions; I want facts."

The biologist stiffened. "You'll get them!"

"Get going. And don't keep assuming that the thing is dead; The perfume may be a protective device. That thing, if alive, is fantastically dangerous. If it gets on one of your laboratory men, I'll almost certainly have to kill him."

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The lab director left minus some of his cockiness.

The Old Man settled back in his chair, sighed, and closed his eyes. "How many mustard plasters the size of that thing can arrive in a spaceship as big as that fraud we looked at?"

"Was there a spaceship?" I asked. "The evidence seems slim."

"There was a ship. There still is."

"We should have examined the site."

"That site would have been our last sight. The other six boys weren't fools. Answer my question."

"How big the ship was doesn't tell me anything about its payload, when I don't know its propulsion method, the jump it made, or what the passengers require. How long is a piece of rope? If you want a guess, I'd say maybe several thousand."

"So there may be several thousand zombies in Iowa tonight. Or harem guards, as Mary puts it." He thought for a moment. "But how am I to get past them to the harem? We can't go shooting every round-shouldered man in Iowa; it would cause talk." He smiled feebly.

"I'll put you another question," I said. "If one spaceship lands in Iowa yesterday, how many will land in North Dakota tomorrow? Or Brazil?"

"Yes." He looked still more troubled. "You kids go enjoy yourselves; you may not have another chance. Don't leave the offices."

I WENT to Cosmetics, got my skin color back and resumed my normal appearance, had a soak and a massage, and then went to the staff lounge in search of a drink and company. I looked around, not knowing whether I was looking for a blonde, brunette, or redhead, but fairly sure that I could spot the chassis.

It was a redhead. Mary was in a booth, sipping a drink and looking much as she had looked at first.

"Hi, Sis," I said, sliding in beside her.

She smiled and answered, "Hello, Bud, drag up a rock," while moving to make room for me.

I dialed for bourbon and water and then said, "Is this your *real* appearance?"

She shook her head. "Not at all. Zebra stripes and two heads. What's yours?"

"My mother smothered me with a pillow, so I never got a chance to find out."

She looked at me as if I were a side of beef. "I can understand why, but I am more hardened than she was. You'll do, Bud."

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"Thanks. Let's drop this 'Bud-and-Sis' act. It gives me inhibitions."

"I think you need every one you can develop."

"Me? Never any violence with me; I'm the 'Barkis-is-willing' type." I might have added that, if I laid a hand on her and she happened not to like it, I'd bet that I would draw back a bloody stump. The Old Man's girls are never sissies.

She smiled. "Well, Miss Barkis is *not* willing."

While we sat there, I got to thinking how well she would look on the other side of a fireplace. My job being what it was, I had never thought seriously about getting married—after all, a babe is just a babe; why get excited? But Mary was an agent herself. Talking to her would not be like shouting off Echo Mountain. I realized that I had been lonely for one hell of a long time.

"Mary—"

"Yes?"

"Are you married?"

"No. But what business—I mean, why does it matter?"

"Look me over. I've got both hands and feet, I'm fairly young, and I don't track mud in the house. You could do worse."

"Listen, wolf, your technique is down. Just because a woman turns you down is no reason to lose your head and offer her a contract. Some women would be mean enough to hold you to it."

"I meant it," I said peevishly.

"What salary do you offer?"

"Damn you! If you want that type of contract, I'll go along. You can keep your pay and I'll give half of mine to you—unless you want to retire."

She shook her head. "I'd never insist on a settlement contract, not with a man I was willing to marry in the first place—"

"I didn't think you would."

"Agents should not marry," she said flatly.

"Agents shouldn't marry anyone but agents."

She started to answer, but stopped suddenly. My phone was talking in my ear, the Old Man's voice, and I knew she was hearing him with hers. "Come into my office," he said.

We both got up without saying anything. Mary stopped me at the door and looked up into my eyes. "*That* is why it is silly to talk about marriage. All the time we've been talking, you've been thinking about the job and so have I."

"I have not."

"Sam, suppose you were married and you woke up to find one of those things on your wife's shoulders, possessing her." There was horror in her eyes. "Suppose I found one of them on *your* shoulders."

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"I'll chance it. And I won't let one get to you."

She touched my cheek. "I don't believe you would."

We went on into the Old Man's office.

He looked up to say, "Come along. We're leaving."

"Where?" I answered. "Or shouldn't I ask?"

"White House. See the President. Shut up."

I did.

AT the White House, the Secret Service guards gave us the works. An X-ray went *beep* and I surrendered my heater. Mary turned out to be a walking arsenal; the machine gave four beeps and hiccough, although you would have sworn she couldn't hide a tax receipt. The Old Man surrendered his cane without waiting to be asked.

Our audio capsules showed up both by X-ray and by metal detector, but the head guard ruled that anything embedded in flesh need not be classed as a weapon. They printed us, photographed our retinas, and ushered us into a waiting room while the Old Man was allowed to see the President alone.

After quite a while we were ushered in. The Old Man introduced us. I stammered. Mary just bowed. The President said he was glad to see us and turned on that smile, the way you see it in the stereocasts, and he made us feel that he *was* glad to see us. I felt warm inside and no longer embarrassed.

The Old Man directed me to report all that I had done and seen and heard on this assignment. I tried to catch his eye when it came to the part about killing Barnes, but he wasn't having any, so I left out the Old Man's order to shoot and made it clear that I had shot to protect another agent—Mary—when I saw Barnes reach for his gun. The Old Man interrupted me. "Make your report complete."

So I filled in the Old Man's order to shoot. The President threw the Old Man a glance, the only expression he showed. I went on about the parasite thing and then up to that present moment.

It was Mary's turn. She fumbled trying to explain to the President why she expected to get a response out of normal men—and had not gotten it out of the McLain boys, the state sergeant, and Barnes. The President helped her by smiling warmly and saying, "My dear young lady, I quite believe it."

Mary blushed. The President listened gravely while she finished, then sat still for several minutes. Presently he said to the Old Man, "Andrew, your section has been invaluable. Your reports

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have sometimes tipped the balance in crucial occasions in history."

The Old Man snorted. "So it's no, is it?"

"I did not say so."

"You were about to."

The President shrugged. "Andrew, I can't start what amounts to war on a woman's intuition."

Mary took a step forward. "Mr. President," she said very earnestly, "I do know. *Those were not normal male men.*"

He answered, "You have not considered an obvious explanation—that they actually were, ah, 'harem guards.' There are always such unfortunates. You merely happened to run across four in one day."

Mary shut up. The Old Man did not. "God damn it, Tom—" I shuddered; you don't talk to the President that way—"I knew you when you were an investigating Senator and I was a key man in your investigations. You know I wouldn't bring you this fairy tale if there were any reasonable way to explain it. How about that spaceship? What was in it? Why couldn't I even reach the spot where it landed?" He hauled out the photograph taken by Space Station Beta and shoved it under the President's nose.

The President seemed unperturbed. "Ah, yes, you and I have a passion for facts. But I have sources of information other than your section. Take this photo—you made a point of it when you phoned. The metes and bounds of the McLain farm as recorded in the local county courthouse check with the triangulated latitude and longitude of this object on this photograph." The President looked up. "Once I got lost right in my own neighborhood. You weren't even in your own neighborhood, Andrew."

"Did you trot out to Des Moines and check those courthouse maps yourself, Tom?"

"Of course not."

"Thank God, or you would be carrying three pounds of pulsing tapioca between your shoulders and God save the United States! Be sure of this—the courthouse clerk and whatever agent was sent both are hag-ridden this very moment. Yes, and the Des Moines chief of police, editors around there, despatchers, cops, all sorts of key people. Tom, I don't know what we are up against, but *they* know what *we* are, and they are pinching off the nerve cells of our social organism before true messages can get back—or they cover up true reports with false ones, just as they did with Barnes. Mr. President, you must order an immediate, drastic quarantine of the area!"

"'Barnes'," the President re-

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peated softly. "Andrew, I had hoped to spare you this, but—" He flipped a key at his desk. "Get me stereo station WDES, Des Moines, the manager's office."

A screen lighted on his desk; he touched another switch and a solid display in the wall lighted up. We were looking into the room we had been in a few hours before.

Looking into it past a man who filled most of the screen—Barnes.

Or his twin. When I kill a man, I expect him to stay dead. I was shaken, but I still believed in myself and my heater.

The man said, "You asked for me, Mr. President?" He sounded as if he were dazzled.

"Yes, Mr. Barnes. Do you recognize these people?"

He looked surprised. "I'm afraid not. Should I?"

"Tell him to call in his office force," the Old Man said.

The President did so. They trooped in, girls mostly, and I recognized the secretary who sat outside the door. One of them squealed, "Ooh, it's the *President*."

None of them identified us, which wasn't surprising with the Old Man and me, but Mary's appearance was just as it had been, and I will bet that her looks would be burned into the mind of any woman who had ever seen her.

But I noticed one thing about them—every one of them was round-shouldered.

TEN minutes later we were standing in the wind on the Rock Creek platform.

The Old Man seemed shrunken and old.

"What now, Boss?" I asked.

"Eh? For you two, nothing. You are both on leave until recalled."

"I'd like to take another look at Barnes' office."

"Stay out of Iowa. That's an order."

"What are you going to do, if I may ask?"

"I am going down to Florida and lie in the sun and wait for the world to go to hell. If you have any sense, you'll do the same. There's damned little time."

He squared his shoulders and stumped away. I turned to speak to Mary, but she was gone. I trotted off and overtook the Old Man. "Excuse me, Boss. Where did Mary go?"

"On leave, no doubt. Don't bother me."

I considered trying to relay to her through the section circuit, only I remembered that I did not know her right name, nor her code, nor her I. D. number. I thought of trying to bull it through by describing her, but

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that was foolishness. Only Cosmetics Records knows the original appearance of an agent and they won't talk.

All I knew was that she had twice appeared as a redhead and that, for my taste, she was "why men fight." Try punching that into a phone!

Instead, I found a room for the night.

I WOKE up at dusk and looked out as the Capital came to life for the night. The river swept away in a wide band past the Memorial; they were adding fluorescine to the water above the District, so the river stood out in curving sweeps of glowing rose and amber and emerald and shining fire. Pleasure boats cut through the colors, each filled, I had no doubt, with couples up to no good and enjoying it.

On the land, here and there among older buildings, bubble domes were lighting up, giving the city a glowing fairyland look. To the east, where the Bomb had landed, there were no old buildings at all and the area was an Easter basket of color—giant eggs, lighted from within.

I've seen the Capital at night oftener than most and had never thought much about it, but tonight I had that "Last Ride Together" feeling. It was not its beauty that choked me up; it was knowing that down under those warm lights were people, alive and individual, making love or having spats, doing business or giving the business, whatever they damn well pleased, each under his own vine and fig tree with nobody to make him afraid, as it says.

I thought about all those people—each with a gray slug clinging to his back, twitching his legs and arms, making his voice say what the slug wished, going where the slug wanted to go.

I made myself a solemn promise: if the parasites won, I'd be dead before I would let one of those things ride me. For an agent it would be simple; just bite my nails—or, if your hands happen to be off there are other ways. The Old Man planned for all professional necessities.

Except that it was his business and mine to keep those people down there safe, not to run out when the going got tough.

I turned away. There was not a confounded thing I could do about it now; I decided that what I needed was company. The room contained the usual catalog of "escort bureaus" and "model agencies" that you'll find in almost any big hotel. I thumbed through it, then slammed it shut. I didn't want just any girl; I wanted one particular girl, who would as soon shoot as shake

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hands. And I did not know where she had gone.

I always carry a tube of "tempus fugit" pills, figuring you never know when giving your reflexes a jolt will get you through a tight spot. Despite the scare propaganda, tempus pills are not habit-forming, the way hashish is.

Nevertheless, a purist would say I was addicted, for I took them occasionally to make a twenty-four hour leave seem like a week. I enjoyed the mild euphoria the pills induced. Primarily, though, they just stretch your subjective time by a factor of ten or more—chop time into finer bits so that you live longer for the same amount of clock-and-calendar. Sure, I know the horrible example of the young man who died of old age in a month through taking the pills steadily, but I took them only once in a while.

Maybe he had the right idea. He lived a long and happy life—you can be sure it seemed to him both long and happy—and died happy at the end. What matter that the sun rose only thirty times? Who is keeping score and what are the rules?

I sat there, staring at my tube of pills and thinking that I had enough to keep me hopped up for what would be, to me, at least two "years." I could crawl in my hole and pull it in after me.

I took out two pills and got a glass of water. Then I put the pills back in the tube, donned my gun, left the hotel and headed for the Library of Congress.

On the way I stopped in a bar and looked at a newscast. There was no news from Iowa, but when is there ever any?

At the Library I went to the catalog, put on blinkers and started scanning for references. "Flying Saucers" led to "Flying Discs," then to "Project Saucer," then "Lights in the Sky," "Fireballs," "Cosmic Diffusion Theory of Life Origins," and two dozen blind alleys and screwball branches of literature. I needed a Geiger counter to tell me what was pay dirt, especially because what I wanted was sure to carry a semantic-content key classing it between Aesop's fables and the Lost Continent myths.

In an hour, though, I had a handful of selector cards. I handed them to the vestal virgin at the desk and waited while she fed them into the hopper. Presently she said, "Most of the films you want are in use. The rest will be delivered to Study Room 9-A. Take the escalator, puhlease."

Room 9-A had one occupant, who looked up and said, "Well, the wolf in person! How did you pick me up? I could swear I shook you."

I said, "Hello, Mary."

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"Hello," she answered, "and now good-bye. Miss Barkis still ain't willin' and she has work to do."

I got annoyed. "Listen, you conceited twerp, odd as it may seem, I did not come here looking for your no-doubt beautiful body. I occasionally do some work myself. When my spools arrive, I'll get the hell out and find another study room—a stag one!"

Instead of flaring back, she immediately softened. "I'm sorry, Sam. Really. A woman hears the same thing so many thousand times—Sit down."

"Thanks, but I'll leave. I'm here to work."

"Stay," she insisted. "Read that notice. If you remove spools from the room to which they are delivered, you will not only cause the sorter to blow a dozen tubes, but you'll give the chief reference librarian a nervous breakdown."

"I'll bring them back when I'm through."

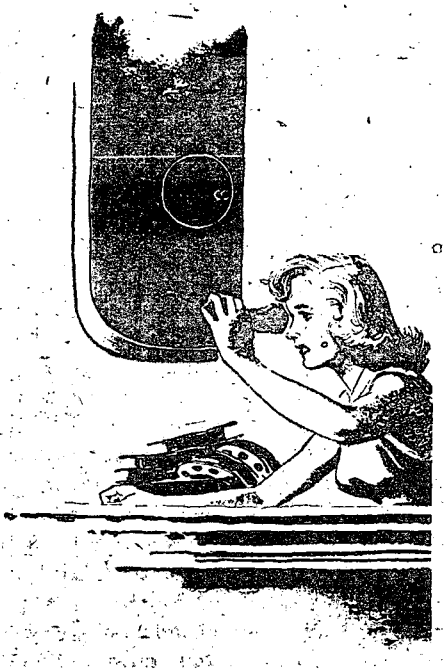
She took my arm and warm tingles went up it. "Please, Sam. I said I'm sorry."

I sat down and grinned. "Nothing could persuade me to leave. I don't intend to let you out of sight until I know your phone code, your home address, and the true color of your hair."

"Wolf," she replied softly. "You'll never know any of them."

She made a great business of fitting her head back into her study machine while ignoring me.

The delivery tube went *thunk* and my spools spilled into the basket. I stacked them on the table by the other machine. One rolled over against the spools Mary had stacked up and knocked them down. I picked up what



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I thought was mine and glanced at the end—the wrong end, as all it held was the serial number and that pattern of dots the selector reads. I turned it over, read the label, and placed it in my pile.

"Hey!" said Mary. "That's mine."

"In a pig's eye," I said politely.

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"But it is. It's the one I want next."

Sooner or later, I can see the obvious. Mary wouldn't be there to study the history of footgear. I picked up others of hers and read the labels. "So that's why nothing I wanted was in," I said. "But you didn't do a thorough job." I handed her my selection.

Mary looked them over, then pushed them all into a single pile. "Shall we split them, or both of us see them all?"

"Fifty-fifty to weed out the junk, then we'll both go over the remainder," I decided. "Let's get busy."

Even after having seen the parasite on poor Barnes' back, even after being assured by the Old Man that a "Flying Saucer" had in fact landed, I was not prepared for the pile of evidence to be found buried in a public library. A pest on Digby and his evaluating formula! The evidence was unmistakable; earth had been visited by ships from outer space not once but many times.

The reports long antedated our own achievement of space travel; some ran back into the Seventeenth Century, or even earlier than that, but it was impossible to judge reports dating back to the time when "science" meant an appeal to Aristotle. The first systematic data came from the 1940s and 50s; the next flurry was in the 1980s. I noticed something and started taking down dates. Strange objects in the sky appeared to hit a cycle at thirty-year intervals, about. A statistical analyst might make something of it.

"Flying Saucers" were tied in with "mysterious disappearances" not only through being in the same category as sea serpents, bloody rain, and such like wild data, but also because in well-documented instances, pilots had chased "Saucers" and never come back, or down, anywhere, i.e., officially classed as crashed in wild country and not recovered—an easy-out explanation.

I got another wild hunch and tried to see whether or not there was a thirty-year cycle in mysterious disappearances and, if so, did it match the objects-in-the-sky cycle? I could not be sure—there are too many people disappearing every year for all kinds of reasons. But vital records have been kept for a long time and not all were lost in the bombings. I noted it down to farm out for professional analysis.

Mary and I did not exchange three words all night. Eventually we got up and stretched. Then I lent Mary change to pay the machine for the spools of notes she had taken (*why* don't women carry change?) and got my wires out of hock, too.

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"Well, what's the verdict?" I asked.

"I feel like a sparrow who has built a nice nest in a rain spout."

I recited the old jingle. "And we'll do the same—refuse to learn and build again in the spout."

"Oh, no! Sam, we've got to do something! It makes a full pattern; this time they are moving in to stay."

"Could be. I think they are."

"Well, what do we *do?*"

"Honey, you are about to learn that in the Country of the Blind, the one-eyed man is in for a hell of a rough ride."

"Don't be cynical. There isn't time."

"No, there isn't. Let's get out of here."

Dawn was on us and the library was almost deserted. I said, "Tell you what. Let's find a barrel of beer, take it to my hotel room, bust in the head, and talk this over."

She shook her head. "Not to your room."

"Damn it, this is business."

"Let's go to my apartment. It's only a couple of hundred miles away; I'll fix breakfast there."

I recalled my purpose in life just in time to leer. "That's the best offer I've had all night. Seriously, why not the hotel? We'd save a half hour's travel."

"You don't want to come to my apartment? I won't bite you."

"I was hoping you would. No, I was wondering why the sudden switch."

"Well, perhaps I wanted to show you the bear traps around my bed. Or perhaps I wanted to prove to you I could cook."

I flagged a 'copter taxi and we went to her apartment.

When we got inside she made a careful search of the place, then came back and said, "Turn around. I want to feel your back."

"Why—"

"Turn around!" I shut up. She gave it a good knuckling, then said, "Now you feel mine."

"With pleasure!" Nevertheless I did a proper job, for I saw what she was driving at. There was nothing under her clothes but girl and assorted items of lethal hardware.

She turned around and gave a sigh. "That's why I didn't want to go to your hotel. Now I *know* we are safe for the first time since I saw that *thing* on the station manager's back. This apartment is tight; I turn off the air and leave it sealed like a vault every time I leave it."

"Say, how about the air conditioning ducts?"

"I didn't turn on the conditioner system; I cracked one of the air raid reserve bottles instead. Never mind; what would you like to eat?"

"Any chance of a steak with

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just the chill taken off it?"

There was. While we chomped, we watched the newscast. Still no news from Iowa.

I DID not get to see the bear traps; she locked her bedroom door. Three hours later she woke me and we had a second breakfast. Presently we struck cigarettes and I switched off the newscast. It was principally a display of the entries for "Miss America." Ordinarily I would have watched with interest, but none of the babes was round-shouldered.

I said, "Well?"

"We've got to arrange the facts and rub the President's nose in them."

"How?"

"We've got to see him again."

I repeated, "How?"

She had no answer.

I said, "We've got only one route—through the Old Man."

I put in the call, using both our codes so that Mary could hear. Presently I heard, "Chief Deputy Oldfield, for the Old Man. Shoot."

"It's got to be the Old Man."

There was a pause. "Is this official or unofficial?"

"Uh, I guess you'd call it unofficial."

"Well, I won't put you through for anything unofficial. And anything official I am handling."

I switched off before I used any bad language. Then I coded again. The Old Man has a special code which is guaranteed to raise him up out of his coffin, but God help the agent who uses it unnecessarily.

He answered with profanity.

"Boss," I said, "on the Iowa matter—"

He broke off short.

"Yes?"

"Mary and I spent all night digging data out of the files. We want to talk it over."

The profanity resumed. Presently he told me to turn it in for analysis and added that he intended to have my ears fried for a sandwich.

"If you can run out, so can we," I said sharply. "Mary and I are resigning right now. That's official!"

Mary's eyebrows went up, but she said nothing. There was a long silence, then he said, in a tired voice, "Palmglade Hotel, North Miami Beach."

"Right away." I sent for a taxi and we went up on the roof. I had the hackie swing out over the ocean to avoid the Carolina speed traps, so we made good time.

THE Old Man lay there, looking sullen and letting sand dribble through his fingers, while we reported. I had brought along a buzz box so that he could get it directly off the wire.

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He glanced up when we came to the point about thirty-year cycles, but he let it ride until my later query about possible similar cycles in disappearances, whereupon he called the Section. "Get me Analysis. Hello, Peter? This is the boss. I want a curve on unexplained disappearances, starting with 1800. Huh? Smooth out known factors and discount steady load—what I want is humps and valleys. When? Two hours ago; what are you waiting for?"

He struggled to his feet, let me hand him his cane and said, "Well, back to the jute mill."

"To the White House?" Mary asked eagerly.

"Eh? Be your age. You two have picked up nothing that would change the President's mind."

"Oh. Then what?"

"I don't know. Keep quiet, unless you have a bright idea."

The Old Man had a car and I drove us back. After I turned it over to block control, I said, "Boss, I've got something that might convince the President." He grunted. "Like this," I went on. "Send two agents in, me and one other. The other agent carries a portable scanning rig and keeps it trained on me. You get the President to watch."

"Suppose nothing happens."

"I'll make it happen. I am going where the spaceship landed and bull my way through. We'll get closeup pix of the real ship, piped into the White House. Then I'll go to Barnes' office and investigate those round shoulders. I'll tear shirts off right in front of the camera. There won't be any finesse; I'll just bust things wide open."

"You realize you have the same chance as a mouse at a cat convention?"

"I'm not so sure. As I see it, these things haven't superhuman powers. I'll bet they are limited to whatever the human being they are riding can do. I don't plan on being a martyr. In any case I'll get pix."

"It might work," Mary put in. "I'll be the other agent. I can—"

The Old Man and I said "No" together—and then I flushed; it was not my prerogative.

Mary went on, "I was going to say that I am the logical one because of the, uh, talent I have for spotting a man with a parasite."

"No," the Old Man repeated. "Where he's going, they'll all have riders — assumed so until proved otherwise. Besides, I am saving you for something."

"For what? This is important."

The Old Man said quietly, "So is the other job. I'm planning to make you a Presidential bodyguard."

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"Oh." She thought and answered, "I'm not certain I could spot a woman who was possessed. I'm not, uh, equipped for it."

"So we take his women secretaries away from him. And you'll be watching him, too, Mary."

"And what if I find that one has gotten to him, in spite of all our careful precautions?"

"You take necessary action, the Vice President succeeds to the chair, and you get shot for treason. Now about this mission. We'll send Jarvis with the scanner and include Davidson as hatchet man. While Jarvis keeps the pickup on you, Sam, Davidson can keep his eyes on Jarvis—and you can try to keep one eye on him."

"You think it will work, then?"

"No, but any plan is better than no plan. Maybe it will stir up something."

WHILE we headed for Iowa—Jarvis, Davidson and I—the Old Man went to Washington. Mary cornered me as we were about to leave, grabbed me by the ears, kissed me firmly and said, "Sam, come back."

I got all tingly and felt like a fifteen-year-old.

Davidson roaded the car beyond the place where I had found a bridge out. I was navigating, using a map on which had been pinpointed the landing site of the real spaceship. The bridge gave a precise reference point. We turned off the road two-tenths of a mile due east of the site and jeeped through the scrub to the spot.

Almost to the spot, I should say. We ran into burned-over ground and decided to walk. The site shown by the Space Station photograph was in the brush fire area—and there was no "Flying Saucer." It would have taken a better detective than I to show that one had ever landed. The fire had destroyed all traces.

Jarvis scanned everything, anyhow, but I knew that the slugs had won another round. As we came out, we ran into an elderly farmer.

"Quite a fire," I remarked, keeping a wary distance.

"Sure was," he said dolefully. "Killed two of my best milch cows, the poor dumb brutes. You fellows reporters?"

"Yes, but we've been sent on a wild goose chase." I wished Mary were along. Maybe this character was naturally round-shouldered, but assuming that the Old Man was right about the spaceship—and he *had* to be right—then this too-innocent bumpkin must know about it and was covering up. Ergo, he had to be hag-ridden.

I threw a glance at my teammates. They were alert and Jarvis was scanning.

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As the farmer turned, I tripped him. He went down with me on his back, clawing at his shirt. Jarvis moved in and got a close-up. I had his back bare before he got his wind.

And it was *bare*—no parasite, no sign of one, nor any place on his body, which I made sure of.

I helped him up and brushed him off; his clothes were filthy with ashes. "I'm sorry," I said.

"You young—" He couldn't find a word bad enough for me. He looked at us and trembled with anger. "I'll have the law on you. If I were twenty years younger, I'd lick all three of you."

"Believe me, old-timer, it was a mistake."

"Mistake!" I thought he was going to cry. "I come back from Omaha and find my place burned, half my stock gone, my son-in-law no place around, strangers snooping around my land, and I like to get torn to pieces. Mistake! What's the world coming to?"

I thought I could answer that last one, but there was no point. I tried to pay him for the indignity, but he slapped my money to the ground. We tucked in our tails and got out.

When we were rolling again, Davidson said, "Are you sure you know what you are up to?"

"I can make a mistake," I said savagely, "but have you ever known the Old Man to?"

"Mmm . . . no. Where next?"

"WDES, stereo station. This one one won't be a mistake."

AT the toll gates into Des Moines, the gatekeeper hesitated. He glanced at a notebook and then at our plates. "Sheriff has a call out for this car," he said. "Pull over to the right."

"Right it is," I agreed, backed up thirty feet and gunned her. The Section's cars are beefed up and hopped up—a good thing, for the gate was stout. I did not slow down on the far side.

"This," said Davidson, "is interesting. Do you still know what you are doing?"

"Cut the chatter," I snapped. "Get this, both of you: we aren't likely to get out. *But we are going to get those pix.*"

Ahead of any pursuit, I slammed to a stop in front of the station and we poured out. None of "Uncle Charlie's" indirect methods—we swarmed into the first elevator and punched for Barnes' floor. When we got there I left the door of the car open.

The receptionist tried to stop us, but we pushed by. The girls looked up, startled. I went straight to Barnes' inner door and tried it; it was locked.

I turned to his secretary. "Where's Barnes?"

"Who is calling, please?" she

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said, about as polite as a fish.

I looked down at her shoulders. Humped. *By God,* I said to myself, *this one has to be. She was here when I killed Barnes.*

I bent over and pulled up her sweater.

I was right. I had to be right. For the second time I stared at one of the parasites.

She struggled and clawed and tried to bite. I judo-cut her neck, almost getting my hand in the mess, and she went limp. I swung her around.

"Jarvis," I yelled, "get a close-up."

The idiot was fiddling with his gear, his big hind end between me and the pickup. He straightened. "School's out," he said. "Blew a tube."

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"Replace it. *Hurry!*"

A stenographer stood up on the other side of the room and fired at the scanner. Hit it, too, before Davidson burned her down. As if it had been a signal, about six of them jumped Davidson. They did not seem to have guns; they just swarmed over him.

I hung onto the secretary and shot from where I was. I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye and turned to find Barnes —"Barnes" number two—standing in his doorway. I shot him through the chest to get the slug I knew was on his back, then returned to the slaughter.

Davidson was up again. A girl crawled toward him; she seemed wounded. He shot her in the face and she stopped. His next bolt

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was just barely past my ear.

I said, "Thanks! Let's get out of here."

The elevator was open; we rushed in, me still burdened with Barnes' secretary. I slammed the door and started it. Davidson was trembling and Jarvis was white.

"Buck up," I said. "You weren't shooting people, but *things*. Like this." I held the girl up and looked down at her back.

Then I almost collapsed. My specimen, the one I had grabbed to take back alive, was gone. Sliped to the floor, probably, and oozed away during the ruckus.

"Jarvis," I said, "did you get *anything?*"

He shook his head.

The girl's back was covered with a rash like a million pinpricks, where the thing had ridden her. I settled her on the floor against the wall of the car. She was still unconscious, so we left her. There was no interference as we went through the lobby to the street.

A policeman had his foot on our car while making out a ticket. He handed it to me and said, "You can't park in this area, Mac."

I said, "Sorry," and signed his copy. Then I gunned the car away, got as clear as I could of traffic—and blasted into the air right from a city street. I wondered whether he added that to the ticket. When I had her at altitude, I switched license plates and identification code. The Old Man thinks of everything.

Only he did not think much of me. I tried to report on the way in, but he cut me short and ordered us into the Section offices. Mary was there with him.

"How much did you see?" I asked when I had finished reporting.

"Transmission cut off when you hit the toll barrier," he informed me. "The President was not impressed by what he saw."

"I suppose not."

"He told me to fire you."

I stiffened. "I am perfectly will—"

"Pipe down!" the Old Man snapped. "I told him that he could fire me, but not my subordinates. You are a thumb-fingered dolt," he went on quietly, "but you can't be spared now."

"Thanks."

Mary had been wandering around the room. She stopped back of Jarvis's chair—and gave the Old Man the sign she had given for Barnes.

I hit Jarvis in the head with my heater and he sagged out of his chair.

"Stand back, Davidson!" the Old Man rapped. His gun was out and pointed at Davidson's chest. "Mary, how about him?"

"He's all right."

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"And him?"

"Sam's clean."

The Old Man's eyes moved over us and I have never felt closer to death. "Peel off your shirts," he said sourly. We did. Mary was right. I had begun to wonder whether I would know it if I *did* have a parasite on me. "Now him," the Old Man ordered. "Gloves."

We stretched Jarvis out and carefully cut his clothing away. We had our live specimen.

I FELT myself ready to retch.

The thought of that *thing* right behind me all the way from Iowa was more than even my unsqueamish stomach could stand.

I swallowed and said, "Let's work it off. Maybe we can still save Jarvis.' I did not really think so; I had a deep-down hunch that anyone who had been ridden by one of those things was spoiled, permanently.

The Old Man waved us back. "Forget Jarvis."

"But—"

"Stow it! If he can be saved, a bit longer won't matter. In any case—" He shut up and so did I. I knew what he meant. We were expendable; the people of the United States were not.

The Old Man, gun drawn and wary, continued to watch the thing on Jarvis's back. He said to Mary, "Get the President. Special code zero zero zero seven."

Mary went to his desk. I heard her talking into the muffler, but my own attention was on the parasite. It made no move to leave Jarvis.

Presently Mary reported, "I can't get him, sir. One of his assistants is on the screen. Mr. McDonough."

The Old Man winced. McDonough was an intelligent, likable man who hadn't changed his mind on anything since he was housebroken. The President used him as a buffer.

No, the President was not available. No, he could not be reached with a message. No, Mr. McDonough was not exceeding his authority; the Old Man was not on the list of exceptions—if there was such a list. Yes, Mr. McDonough would be happy to make an appointment; that was a promise. Today? Out of the question. Tomorrow? Impossible. How would next Friday do?

The Old Man switched off and seemed about to have a stroke. Then he took two deep breaths, his features relaxed, and he said, "Dave, ask Doc Graves to step in. The rest of you keep your distance."

The head of the biological lab came in shortly. "Doc," said the Old Man, "there is one that isn't dead."

Graves looked closely at Jar-

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vis's back. "Interesting," he said. He dropped to one knee.

"Stand back!"

Graves looked up. "But I must have an opportunity—"

"I want you to study it, yes, but, first, you've got to keep it alive. Second, you've got to keep it from escaping. Third, you've got to protect yourself."

Graves smiled. "I'm not afraid of it."

"*Be* afraid of it! That's an order."

"I must rig up an incubator to care for it after we remove it. These things obviously need oxygen—not free oxygen, but oxygen from its host. Perhaps a large dog would suffice."

"No," snapped the Old Man. "Leave it where it is."

"What? Is this man a volunteer?" The Old Man did not answer. Graves pointed out, "Human laboratory subjects must be volunteers. Professional ethics, you know."

"Doctor Graves, every single agent in this Section is a volunteer for whatever I find necessary. Please carry out my orders."

After they had carted Jarvis away, Davidson and Mary and I went to the lounge for a drink or four. We needed them. Davidson had the shakes. When the first drink failed to fix him, I said, "Look, Dave, I feel as bad about those girls as you do, but it could not be helped. Get that through your head."

"How bad was it?" asked Mary.

"Pretty bad. I don't know how many we killed." I turned to Davidson. "We weren't shooting people; we were shooting parasites. Don't you see that?"

"That's just it. They weren't human. You shoot and they keep coming toward you."

After a bit, he left. Mary and I talked a while, trying for answers and getting nowhere. Then she announced that she was sleepy and headed for the women's dormitory. The Old Man had ordered all hands to sleep in that night, so I went to the boys' wing and crawled in a sack.

THE air raid alarm woke me. I stumbled into clothes as blowers sighed off; then the intercom bawled in the Old Man's voice, "Anti-gas and anti-radiation procedures! Seal everything! All hands gather in the conference hall. *Move!*"

Being a field agent, I had no local duties. I shuffled down the tunnel to the offices. The Old Man was in the big hall, looking grim. I wanted to ask what was up, but there were a dozen clerks, agents, stenos and such there before me.

The Old Man sent me out to get the door tally from the guard on watch. He called the roll and

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presently it was clear that every person listed on the door tally was now inside the hall, from old Miss Haines, the Old Man's secretary, down to the steward of the lounge—except the door guard and Jarvis. The tally had to be right; we keep track of who goes in and out a bit more carefully than a bank keeps track of money.

I was sent out again for the door guard. It took a call back to the Old Man before he would leave his post; he then threw the bolt switch and followed me. When we got back, Jarvis was there, attended by Graves and a lab man. He was wrapped in a hospital robe, conscious, apparently, but dopy.

I began to have some notion of what it was all about. The Old Man was facing the assembled staff and keeping his distance; he had his gun out. "One of the invading parasites is loose among us," he said. "To some of you, that means too much. To the rest of you, I will have to explain, as the safety of all of us—of our whole race—depends on complete cooperation and utter obedience." He went on to explain briefly but with ugly exactness what a parasite was, what the situation was. "In short," he concluded, "the parasite is almost certainly in this room. One of us looks human but is an automaton, moving at the will of our deadliest enemy."

People stole glances at each other. Some tried to draw away. A moment before we had been a team; now we were a mob, each suspicious of the other. I found myself edging away from the man closest to me—Ronald, the lounge steward, whom I had known for years.

Graves cleared his throat. "Chief," he started in, "I took every reasonable—"

"Stow it. Bring Jarvis out in front. Take his robe off."

Graves shut up and he and his assistant complied. Jarvis seemed only partly aware of his surroundings. Graves must have drugged him.

"Turn him around," the Old Man ordered.

Jarvis let himself be turned; there was the mark of the slug, a red rash on shoulders and neck. There had been whispers and embarrassed giggles when Jarvis had been stripped; now there was a dead hush.

"We are going *to get that slug!*" said the Old Man. "Furthermore, we are going to capture it alive. You have all seen where a parasite rides a man. I'm warning you; if the parasite gets burned, I'll burn the man who did it. If you have to shoot to catch it, shoot low. Come here!" He pointed his gun at me, halted me halfway between the crowd and

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himself. "Graves, sit Jarvis down behind me. No, leave his robe off." The Old Man turned back to me. "Drop your gun on the floor."

The Old Man's gun was pointed at my belly; I was very careful how I drew mine. I slid it six feet away from me. "Take off all your clothes," he said.

The Old Man's gun overcame my inhibitions, though it did not help to have one of the girls whisper, "Not bad!" and another reply, "Knobby, I'd say." I blushed.

After he looked me over, the Old Man told me to pick up my gun. "Back me up," he ordered, "and keep an eye on the door. You, Dotty Something-or-other —you're next."

Dotty was a girl from the clerical pool. She had no gun, of course, and she was dressed in a floor-length negligee. She stepped forward, stopped.

"You really mean it?" she said incredulously.

"*Move!*"

She almost jumped. "Well! No need to take a person's head off." She bit her lip as she unfastened the clasp at her waist. "I ought to get a bonus for this," she said defiantly, then threw the robe from her.

"Over against the wall," the Old Man said savagely. "Now the rest of you."

In twenty minutes there were more square yards of gooseflesh exposed than I had ever seen before, and the pile of guns looked like a small-arms arsenal.

When Mary's turn came, she took her clothes off quickly and without a fuss. She made nothing of it, wearing her skin with quiet dignity. She added considerably to the pile of hardware. I decided she just plain liked guns.

WE were all evidently free of parasites, except the Old Man and his old-maid secretary. I think he was a bit in awe of Miss Haines. He looked distressed and poked about in the pile of clothing with his cane. Finally he looked up at her. "Miss Haines—if you please."

I thought to myself, brother, this time you are going to have to use force.

She stood there, facing him down, a statue of offended modesty. I moved closer and said, out of the corner of my mouth, "Boss, how about yourself? Suppose you take 'em off." He looked startled. "I mean it," I said. "It's you or she. Might be either. Out of those duds."

The Old Man can recognize the inevitable. He said, "Have her stripped." He began fumbling at his zippers, looking grim. I told Mary to take a couple of women

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and peel Miss Haines. When I turned back, the Old Man had his trousers at half mast—and then Miss Haines made a break for it.

The Old Man was between us and I couldn't get in a clean shot and every other agent in the place was disarmed! I don't think it was accident; the Old Man did not trust them not to shoot. He wanted that slug alive.

She was out the door and running down the passage by the time I got organized. I could have winged her in the passageway, but I was inhibited—first, I could not shift gears emotionally that fast. I mean to say she was still Old Lady Haines, secretary to the boss, the one who bawled me out for poor grammar in my reports. In the second place, if she was carrying a parasite, I did not want to risk burning it.

She ducked into a room. Again I hesitated—sheer habit; it was the ladies' room.

But only a moment. I slammed the door open and looked around, gun ready.

Something hit me back of my right ear.

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I CAN give no clear account of the next few moments. I was out cold, for a time at least. I remember a struggle and some shouts: "Look out!" "Damn her, she's bitten me!" "Watch your hands!" Then somebody quietly, "By her hands and feet—careful." Somebody said, "How about him?" and someone answered, "Later. He's not hurt."

I was still practically out as they left, but I began to feel a flood of life stirring back into me. I sat up, feeling extreme urgency about something. I got to my feet, staggering, and went to the door. I looked out cautiously; nobody was in sight. I trotted down the corridor, away from the conference hall.

At the outer door, I realized that I was naked and tore on down the hallway to the men's wing. There I grabbed the first clothes I could find and pulled them on. The shoes were much too small for me; it did not seem to matter.

I ran back to the exit, found the switch. The door opened.

I thought I had made a clean escape, but somebody shouted, "Sam!" just as I was making my choice of six doors and then I plunged on out. At once I had three more beyond the one I picked. The warren we called the "offices" was served by a spaghettilike mess of tunnels. I came up finally inside a subway fruit-and-bookstall, nodded to the proprietor, swung the counter gate and mingled with the crowd.

I caught the up-river jet express and got off at the first station. I crossed over to the down-

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river, waited around the change window until a man came up who displayed quite a bit of money as he bought his counter. I got on the same train and got off when he did. At the first dark spot I rabbit-punched him. Now I had money and was ready to operate. I did not know why I had to have money, but I knew that I needed it for what I was about to do.

I SAW things around me with a curious double vision, as if I stared through rippling water—yet I felt no surprise and no curiosity. I moved like a sleepwalker, unaware of what I was going to do, and still I was wide awake, aware of who I was, where I was, what my job at the Section had been. And, although I did not know my objective, I was always conscious of what I was doing and sure that each act was the necessary act at that moment.

I felt no emotion most of the time, except the contentment that comes from work which needs to be done. That was on the conscious level. Someplace, more levels down than I understand about, I was excruciatingly unhappy, terrified, and filled with guilt, but that was down, way down, locked, suppressed. I was hardly aware of it and not affected by it.

I knew that I had been seen to leave. That shout of "Sam!" was for me; only two persons knew me by that name and the Old Man would have used my right name. So Mary had seen me leave. It was a good thing, I thought, that she had let me find out where her apartment was. It would be necessary to booby trap it against her using it. In the meantime I must get on with work and keep from being picked up.

I was moving through a warehouse district, all my training at work to avoid being noticed. Shortly I found a satisfactory building; there was a sign: LOFT FOR LEASE—SEE RENTAL AGENT ON GROUND FLOOR. I scouted it, noted the address, then doubled back to a Western Union booth. There I took a vacant machine and sent this message: EXPEDITE TWO CASES TINY TOTS TALK TALES SAME DISCOUNT CONSIGNED JOEL FREEMAN and added the address of the loft. I sent it to Roscoe & Dillard, Jobbers and Manufacturers Agents, Des Moines, Iowa.

As I left the booth, the sight of one of the Kwikfede restaurants reminded me that I was hungry, but the reflex abruptly cut off and I thought no more about it. I returned to the warehouse, found a dark corner in the rear, and settled back to wait for dawn and business hours.

I have a dim recollection of claustrophobic nightmares.

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At nine o'clock I met the rental agent as he unlocked his office, and leased the loft, paying him a fat squeeze for immediate possession. I went up to the loft, unlocked it, and waited.

About ten-thirty my crates were delivered. After the expressmen were gone, I opened a crate, took out one cell, warmed it, and got it ready. Then I found the rental agent again and said, "Mr. Greenberg, could you come up for a moment? I want to see about making some changes in the lighting."

HE fussed, but did so. When we entered the loft I closed the door and led him to the crate. "Here," I said, "if you will lean over, you will see just what I mean."

I got him with a grip that cut off his wind, ripped his jacket and shirt up, and, with my free hand, transferred a master from the cell to his bare back, then held him tight until he relaxed. I let him up, tucked his shirt in and dusted him off. When he caught his breath, I said, "What news from Des Moines?"

"What do you want to know?" he asked. "How long have you been out?"

I started to explain, but he interrupted with, "Let's have direct conference and not waste time." I skinned up my shirt, he did the same, and we sat down on the unopened crate, back to back, so that our masters could be in contact. My own mind was blank; I have no idea how long it went on. I watched a fly droning around a dusty cobweb.

THE building superintendent was our next recruit. He was a large Swede and it took both of us. After that Mr. Greenberg called up the owner and insisted that he had to come down and see some damage that had occurred to the structure — just what, I don't know; I was busy working with the super, opening and warming more cells.

The owner of the building was a prize and we all felt pleased, including, of course, the man himself. He belonged to the Constitution Club, the membership of which read like *Who's Who in Finance, Government and Industry*.

It was pushing noon; we had no time to lose. The super went out to buy clothes and a satchel for me, and he sent the owner's chauffeur up to be recruited as he did so. At twelve-thirty we left, the owner and I, in his town car; the satchel contained twelve masters, in their cells but ready.

The owner signed *J. Hardwick Potter & Guest*. A flunky tried to take my bag, but I insisted that I needed it to change my

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shirt before lunch. We stalled around in the washroom until we had it to ourselves, except for the attendant—whereupon we recruited him and sent him with a message to the manager that a guest was ill in the washroom.

After we took care of the manager, he obtained a white coat and I became another washroom attendant. I had only ten masters left, but the cases would be picked up from the loft and delivered to the club shortly. The regular attendant and I used up the rest of those I had before the lunch hour rush was over. One guest walked in on us while we were busy and I had to kill him. We stuffed him into the mop closet.

There was a lull after that, as the cases had not yet arrived. Hunger reflex nearly doubled me over; then it dropped off, but persisted. I told the manager, who had me served lunch in his office. The cases arrived as I was finishing.

During the drowsy period in the mid-afternoon, we secured the place. By four o'clock everyone in the building—members, staff, and guests—were with us. From then on, we processed them in the lobby as the doorman passed them in. Later in the day the manager phoned Des Moines for more cases. Our big prize came that evening—the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury. We saw a real victory; the Treasury Department is charged with the safety of the President.

SOME days after I was recruited, I gave the club manager instructions about shipments of masters' carrying cells. I was fleetingly aware, as I did so, that three more ships had landed, but my overt knowledge was limited to an address in New Orleans.

I thought nothing about it; I went on with my work. I was a new "special assistant to Mr. Potter" and spent the days in his office—and the nights, too. Actually, the relationship may have reversed; I frequently gave oral instructions to Potter. Or perhaps I understand the social organization of the parasites as little now as I did then.

Through me, my master knew as much as I did. It knew that I was one human known to the Old Man to have been recruited—and knew, I am sure, that the Old Man would not cease to search for me, to recapture me or kill me.

It seems odd that it did not change bodies and kill mine; we had vastly more recruits available than we had masters. It could not have felt anything parallel to human squeamishness, for masters newly delivered from their transit cells frequently damaged their hosts. We always destroyed

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the host and found a new one. On the other hand, would a skilled cowhand destroy a well-trained horse in favor of an untried, strange mount? That may have been why I was kept hidden and used.

After a time the city was "secured" and my master started taking me out on the streets. I do not mean that every inhabitant wore a hump—the humans were very numerous and the masters still very few—but the key positions in the city were held by our own recruits, from the cop on the corner to the mayor and the chief of police, not forgetting ward bosses, ministers, board members, and any and all in public communication and news. The majority continued their usual affairs, not only undisturbed by the masquerade but unaware of it.

Unless, of course, one of them

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happened to be in the way of some purpose of a master, in which case he was disposed of.

That was when I was allowed outside, walked to the uptown launching platform and made to order a cab. One was lifted to the loading ramp and I started to get in. But an old gentleman bustled up and climbed into it ahead of me.

I received an order to dispose of him. It was immediately countermanded by another telling me to go slow and be careful. I said, "Excuse me, sir, but this cab is taken."

"Quite," the elderly man replied. "I've taken it."

"You will have to find another," I said reasonably. "May I see your ticket?"

I had him; the cab carried the launching number shown by my ticket, but he did not stir. "Where are you going?" he demanded.

"New Orleans," I answered, and learned for the first time my destination.

"Then you can drop me off in Memphis."

I shook my head. "It's out of my way."

"All of fifteen minutes!" He seemed to have difficulty controlling his temper. "Driver, explain to this person the public conveyance rules."

The driver stopped picking his teeth. "It's nothing to me. I pick 'em up, I take 'em, I drop 'em. Settle it yourselves or I'll ask the despatcher for another fare."

I hesitated, not yet having been instructed. Then I found myself climbing inside. "New Orleans," I said, "with a stop at Memphis."

The driver shrugged and signaled the control tower. The other passenger snorted and got in after me.

In the air, he opened his briefcase and spread papers across his knees. Watching him with disinterest, I found myself shifting position to let me get at my gun easily. The man shot out a hand, grabbed my wrist. "Not so fast, son," he said, and his features broke into the Satanic grin of the Old Man himself.

My reflexes are fast, but I was at the disadvantage of having everything routed from me to my master, passed on by it, and action routed back to me. How much delay is that? I don't know. As I was drawing, I felt a gun against my ribs. "Take it easy."

With his other hand, he thrust something against my side. I felt a prick, and then through me spread the warm tingle of a jolt of "Morpheus" taking hold. I made one more attempt to pull my gun free and sank forward.

I WAS vaguely aware of voices. Someone was handling me roughly and someone else was

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saying, "Watch out for that ape!" Another voice replied, "It's all right; his tendons are cut," to which the first retorted, "He's still got *teeth*, hasn't he?"

Yes, I thought fretfully, *and if you get close, I'll bite you with them.* The remark about cut tendons seemed to be true; none of my limbs would move, but that did not worry me as much as being called an ape. It was a shame to call a man names when he couldn't protect himself.

I wept a little and then fell into a stupor, until I heard, "Feeling better, son?"

The Old Man was leaning over the end of my bed, staring thoughtfully. His chest was bare and grizzled.

"Unh," I said, "pretty good, I guess." I started to sit up and found I could not.

The Old Man came around to the side. "We can take those restraints off," he said, fiddling with clasps. "Didn't want you hurting yourself. There!"

I sat up, rubbing myself.

"Now," said the Old Man, "how much do you remember?"

"Remember?"

"They caught you. Do you remember anything after the parasite got to you?"

I felt a sudden wild fear and clutched at the bed. "Boss! They know where this place is! *I told them.*"

"No, they don't," he answered quietly, "because these aren't the offices you remember. I had the old ones evacuated. They don't know about this hangout — I think. So you remember?"

"Of course I remember. I got out of here—I mean out of the old offices and went up—" My thoughts raced ahead; I had a sudden image of holding a live master in my bare hand, ready to place it on the rental agent.

I threw up.

The Old Man said gently, "Go ahead."

"Boss, they're all around. They've got the city."

"I know. Same as Des Moines. And Minneapolis, St. Paul, New Orleans, and Kansas City. Maybe more. I don't know—I can't be everywhere." He scowled and added, "It's like fighting with your feet in a sack. We're losing fast. We can't even clamp down on the cities we know about."

"Good God! Why not?"

"You should know. Because 'older and wiser heads' are still unconvinced. Because when the parasites take over a city, everything goes on as before."

I stared.

"Never mind," he said gently. "You are the first break we've had, the first victim to be recaptured alive—and now we find you remember what happened. That's important. And your para-

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site is the first one we've managed to capture and keep alive. We'll have a chance to—"

My face must have been a mask of terror. The notion that my master was still alive and might get to me again was more than I could stand.

The Old Man shook me. "Take it easy. You are still pretty weak."

"*Where is it?*"

"Eh? The parasite? Don't worry about it. It's living off your opposite number, a red orang-utan, name of Napoleon. It's safe."

"*Kill it!*"

"Hardly. We need it alive for study."

I must have gone to pieces, for he slapped me. "Take a brace," he said. "I hate to bother you when you are sick, but I've got to. We have to get down on wire everything you remember."

I pulled myself together and started making a careful report of all that I could remember. I described renting the loft and recruiting my first victim, then how we moved on to the Constitution Club. The Old Man nodded. "Logical. You were a good agent, even for *them*."

"You don't understand," I objected. "*I* didn't do any thinking. I knew what was going on, but that was all. It was as if—" I paused, stuck for words.

"Never mind. Get on."

"After we recruited the club manager, the rest was easy. We took them as they came in and—"

"Names?"

"M. C. Greenberg, Thor Hansen, J. Hardwick Potter, his chauffeur Jim Wakeley, a little guy called 'Jake' who was washroom attendant, but he had to be disposed of later—his master would not let him take time out for necessities. Then there was the manager; I never did get his name." I paused, letting my mind run back, trying to make sure of each recruit. "Oh, my God!"

"What is it?"

"The Assistant Secretary of the Treasury!"

"You got *him?*"

"Yes. The first day. How long ago was that? Chief, the Treasury Department protects the President!"

But there was just a hole in the air where the Old Man had been.

I WOKE up with my mouth foul, head buzzing, and a sense of impending disaster. Nevertheless I felt fine, by comparison. A cheerful voice said, "Feeling better?"

A small brunette creature was bending over me. She was a cute little bug and I was well enough to appreciate the fact, though faintly. She was dressed in an odd costume, white shorts, a wisp

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of stuff that covered her breasts, and a sort of metal carapace that covered the neck, shoulders and spine.

"Some," I admitted.

"Mouth taste unpleasant?"

"Like a mailman's sox."

She gave me some stuff in a glass; it burned a little and washed away the bad taste.

"No," she said, "don't swallow it. 'Pit it out and I'll get you water." I obeyed. "I'm Doris Marsden," she went on, "your day nurse."

"Glad to know you, Doris," I answered and stared at her. "Say, why the burlesque getup? Not that I don't like it, but you look like a refugee from a comic book."

She giggled. "You'll get used to it. I did."

"I like it. But why?"

"Old Man's orders." Then I knew why, and I started to feel worse again. Doris said, "Now for supper." She got a tray.

"I don't want anything to eat."

"Open up," she said firmly, "or you'll get it through a tube."

Between gulps, taken in self-defense, I managed to choke out, "I feel pretty good. One jolt of 'gyro' and I'll be on my feet."

"No stimulants," she said flatly, still shoveling it in. "Special diet and lots of rest, with a sleepy pill later."

"What's wrong with me?"

"Exhaustion, starvation, and incipient scurvy. You also had scabies and lice, but we got those whipped. Now you know—and if you tell the doctor, I'll call you a liar to your face. Turn over."

I did so and she started changing dressings. I appeared to be spotted with sores. I thought about what she had told me and tried to remember how I had lived under my master.

"Stop trembling," she said. "Having a bad one?"

"I'm all right," I told her. As near as I could recall, I had not eaten oftener than every second or third day. Bathing? Let me see—I hadn't bathed at all! I had shaved every day and put on a clean shirt, but only because that was necessary to the masquerade and the master knew it.

On the other hand, I had never taken off my shoes from the time I had stolen them until the Old Man had recaptured me, and they had been too tight to start with. I couldn't even feel my feet.

I LIKE nurses; they are calm and earthy and tolerant. Miss Briggs, my night nurse, was not the cute job that Doris was; she had a face like a horse. She wore the same musical comedy rig that Doris sported, but she wore it with a no-nonsense air and strode like a grenadier. Doris, bless her heart, jiggled pleasantly when she walked.

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Miss Briggs refused me a second sleeping pill when I woke up in the night and had the horrors, but she did play poker with me and skinned me out of half a month's pay. I tried to find out from her about the President, but she wasn't talking. She would not admit that she knew anything about parasites, Flying Saucers, or what not—and she herself dressed in a costume that could have only one purpose!

I asked her what the public news was, then. She maintained that she had been too busy to look at a 'cast. So I asked to have a stereo box moved into my room. She said I would have to ask the doctor; I was on the 'quiet' list. I asked when I was going to see this so-called doctor. About then her call bell sounded and she left.

I fixed her. While she was gone, I cold-decked the deal, so that she got a pat hand—and then I wouldn't bet against her.

I GOT to sleep and was awakened by Miss Briggs slapping me in the face with a washcloth. She got me ready for breakfast. Then Doris relieved her and brought in the tray. While I was chomping I tackled her for news—with the same score I had made with Miss Briggs. Nurses run a hospital as if it were a nursery for backward children.

Davidson came to see me after breakfast. "Heard you were here," he said. He was wearing shorts and nothing else, except that his left arm was covered by a dressing.

"More than *I've* heard," I complained. "What happened to you?"

"Bee stung me."

If he didn't want to tell how he had gotten burned, that was his business. I said, "The Old Man was in here yesterday and left very suddenly. Seen him since?"

"Yep."

"Well?"

"Have the psych boys cleared you for classified matters?"

"Is there any doubt about it?"

"You're darn tootin' there is. Poor old Jarvis never did pull out of it."

I hadn't thought about Jarvis. "How is he now?"

"He isn't. Dropped into a coma and died—the day after you left. I mean the day after you were captured." Davidson looked me over. "You must be tough."

I did not feel tough. Tears of helplessness and frustration welled up again and I blinked them back. Davidson pretended not to notice and went on, "You should have seen the ruckus after you gave us the slip. The Old Man took out after you, wearing nothing but a gun and a look of grim determination. He would have

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caught you, but the police picked him up and we had to get him out of hock."

I grinned feebly. There was something both gallant and silly about the Old Man charging out to save the world in his birthday suit. "Sorry I missed it. What else has happened—lately?"

Davidson looked me over. "Wait a minute." He stepped out and was gone a short time. When he came back, he said, "The Old Man says okay. What do you want to know?"

"Everything! What happened yesterday?"

"That's how I got this." He waved his damaged wing at me. "I was lucky," he added. "Three agents were killed. Quite a fracas."

"But how about the President? Was he—"

Doris bustled in. "Oh, there you are!" she said to Davidson. "I told you to stay in bed. You're due at Mercy Hospital right now. The ambulance has been waiting ten minutes."

He stood up, grinned, and pinched her with his good hand. "The party can't start until I get there."

"Well, hurry!"

"Coming."

I called out, "Hey! How about the *President?*"

Davidson looked back over his shoulder. "Oh, him? He's all right. Not a single scratch."

He went on.

Doris came back a few minutes later, fuming. "Patients!" she said, like a swear word. "I should have had twenty minutes for his injection to take hold. So instead I had to give it to him when he got into the ambulance."

"Injection for what?"

"Didn't he tell you?"

"No."

"Amputation and graft, lower left arm."

"Oh." *Well,* I thought, *I won't hear the end of the story from Davidson.* Grafting on a new limb is a shock. They keep the patient hopped up for at least ten days. So I tackled Doris again. "How about the Old Man? Was he wounded?"

"You talk too much," she answered. "It's time for morning nourishment and your nap." She produced a glass of milky slop.

"Speak up, wench, or I'll spill it on the floor."

"The Old Man? You mean the Chief of Section?"

"Who else?"

"*He's* not on the sick list." She crossed her fingers on both hands. "I wouldn't want *him* as a patient!"

FOR two or three more days I was kept in bed and treated like a child. I did not care; it was the first real rest I had had in

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years. The sores got better and presently I was encouraged—"required," I should say—to take light exercise around the room.

The Old Man called on me. "Well," he said, "still malingering."

I flushed. "Damn your black, chilblained heart," I told him. "Get me some pants and I'll show you who is malingering."

"Slow down." He took my chart and looked it over. "Nurse," he said, "get this man a pair of shorts. I'm restoring him to duty."

Doris faced up to him like a banty hen. "You may be the big boss, but you can't give orders here. The doctor will—"

"Stow it," he said, "and get those drawers!"

She went out, sputtering, and came back with the doctor. The Old Man said mildly, "Doc, I sent for pants, not for you."

The medico replied stiffly, "I'll thank you not to interfere with my patients."

"He's not your patient. He's going back on duty."

"If you do not like the way I run my department, sir, you may have my resignation."

The Old Man answered, "I beg your pardon, Doctor. Sometimes I become too preoccupied to follow correct procedure. Will you please do me the favor of examining this patient? If he can be restored to duty, it would help me to have his services at once."

The doctor's jaw muscles were jumping, but he said, "Certainly, sir." He went through a show of studying my chart, then tested my reflexes. "He needs more recuperation, but you may have him. Nurse, fetch clothing for this man."

Clothing consisted of shorts and shoes. Everybody else was dressed the same way, however, and it was comforting to see all those bare shoulders with no masters clinging to them. I told the Old Man so.

"Best defense we've got," he growled, "even if it does make the city look like a beach. If we don't win this set-to before winter weather, we're licked."

He stopped at a door with a sign: BIOLOGICAL LABORATORY — STAY OUT!

I hung back. "Where are we going?"

"To take a look at your twin, the ape with your parasite."

"That's what I thought. Not for me!" I could feel myself tremble.

"Now, look, son," he said patiently. "Get over your panic. The best way is to face up to it. I know it's hard. I've spent hours getting used to the sight."

"You don't know—you *can't* know!" I had the shakes so badly that I had to clutch the door frame.

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"I suppose it's different," he said slowly, "when you've actually had it. Jarvis—" He broke off.

"You're damn right it's different! You're not going to get *me* in *there!*"

"No, I guess not. Well, go on back, son, and check in at the infirmary." He started into the laboratory.

He had gotten three or four steps away before I called out, "Boss!" He stopped and turned, his face expressionless. "Wait," I added. "I'm coming."

"You don't have to."

"I'll do it. It—it just takes a while—to get your nerve back."

AS I came alongside him, he grasped my arm, warmly and affectionately, and continued to hold it as we walked. We went through another locked door and into a room conditioned warm and moist. The ape was there, caged.

His torso was supported and restrained by a strap-metal framework. His arms and legs hung limply, as if he had no control over them. He looked up at us with eyes malevolent and intelligent; then the fire died out and they were merely the eyes of a dumb brute in pain.

"Around to the side," the Old Man said.

I would have hung back, but he still had me by the arm. The ape followed us with his eyes, but his body was held by the frame. From the new position I could see—

The thing that had ridden my back for an endless time, spoken with my mouth, thought with my brain. My master.

"Steady," the Old Man said softly.

I took a couple of deep breaths and managed to slow my heart down. I made myself stare at it.

It is not the appearance of a parasite which arouses horror, nor is it even from knowing what they can do—for I felt the horror the first time I saw one, before I knew what it was. I tried to tell the Old Man so.

He nodded, his eyes on the parasite. "It's the same with everybody. Unreasoning fear, like a bird with a snake. Probably its prime weapon." He looked away from it, as if too long a sight were too much for even his rawhide nerves.

I stuck with him, telling myself that it couldn't harm *me*. I looked away and found the Old Man's eyes on me.

"How about it?" he said. "Getting hardened?"

"A little. All I want is to kill it! I could spend my life killing them and killing them." I began to shake again.

The Old Man studied me.

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"Here," he said, and handed me his gun.

It startled me. I was unarmed, having come straight from bed. I took it, but looked at him questioningly.

"You want to kill it. If you have to, go ahead. Right now."

"But—you told me you needed this one for study."

"I do. But if you feel that you need to kill it, to make you a whole man again, go ahead."

"To make me a whole man again—" The Old Man knew what medicine it would take to cure me. I was no longer trembling; the gun was cradled in my hand, ready to spit and kill. While this one was alive, I would still crouch and tremble in the dark. As for others—why, we could capture a dozen at the Constitution Club. With this one dead, I'd lead the raid myself.

Breathing rapidly, I raised the gun.

Then I turned and chucked it to the Old Man.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know. It was enough to know that I could."

"I figured it would be."

I felt warm and relaxed, not even angry with the Old Man for what he had done. "I know you did, damn you. How does it feel to be a puppet master?"

He answered soberly, "Not me. The most I ever do is lead a man on the path he wants to follow. *There* is the puppet master."

"Yes," I agreed softly, "'the puppet master.' You think you know what you mean, but you don't. I hope you never do."

"I hope so, too," he answered.

I could look now without trembling. Still staring at it, I said, "Boss, when you are through with it, promise me that I can kill it."

"It's a promise."

WE were interrupted by a man bustling in. He was dressed in shorts and a lab coat; it made him look silly. It was not Graves—I never saw him again. I imagine the Old Man ate him for lunch.

"Why are you wearing a coat?" The Old Man's gun was out and menacing.

The man stared at the gun as if it were a bad joke. "Why, I was working. There is always a chance of splattering one's self. Some of our solutions are rather—"

"Take it off!"

The man took his coat off. His shoulders didn't have the telltale rash. "Take that damned coat and burn it," the Old Man told him. "Then get back to work."

The man hurried away, his face red, then stopped and said, "Chief, are you ready for that, uh, procedure?"

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"Shortly. I'll let you know."

He left. The Old Man wearily put his gun away. "Post an order," he muttered. "Read it aloud. Make them initial it. Tattoo it on their narrow little chests. And always some smart Aleck thinks it doesn't mean him. Scientists!"

I turned back to my former master. It still revolted me, but there was a gusty feeling of danger, too, that was not totally unpleasant. "Boss," I asked, "what are you going to do with this thing?"

"I plan to interview it."

"To what? But how—"

"No, the ape can't talk. We'll have to have a volunteer—a human volunteer."

WHEN I began to visualize what he meant, the horror struck me again full force. "You can't mean that. You wouldn't do that to anybody."

"It needs to be done and it will be done."

"You won't get any volunteers!"

"I've got one."

"You have? Who?"

"But I don't want to use the one I've got. I'm still looking for the right person."

I was disgusted and showed it. "If you've got one, you won't find another; there can't be two people that crazy."

"Possibly," he agreed. "But I still don't want the one I've got. The interview is a 'must,' son; we are fighting with a total lack of military intelligence. We don't know our enemy, we can't negotiate with him, we don't know where he comes from, nor what makes him tick. We've got to find out; our existence depends on it. The *only* way to talk to these things is through a human. So it will be done. But I'm still looking for a volunteer."

"Don't look at me!"

"I *am* looking at you."

I managed to splutter, "You're crazy! I should have killed it when I had your gun—I would have if I had known why you wanted it. But as for volunteering to let you put that thing—*No!*"

He ploughed on as if he had not heard me. "It has to be a man who can take it. Jarvis wasn't stable enough, nor tough enough. We know you are."

"Me? All you know is that I lived through it once. I . . . I couldn't *stand* it again."

"You are proved and salted. With anyone else, I run more risk of losing an agent."

"Since when did you worry about risking an agent?" I said bitterly.

"Always. I am giving you one more chance, son. Are you going to do this, knowing that it has to be done and that you stand the best chance of anybody—and can

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be of most use to us, because you did live through it—or are you going to let some other agent risk his reason and his life in your place?"

I started to try to explain how I felt. I could not stand the thought of dying while possessed by a parasite. Even worse was the prospect of *not* dying once the slug touched me. But I could not find words for it.

I could feel my face set and twitch with tension. "There is a limit to what any man can go through. I won't do it."

He turned to the intercom on the wall. "Laboratory," he called out. "We'll start now. Hurry up!"

I recognized the voice of the man who had walked in on us. "Which subject?" he asked.

"The original volunteer."

"The smaller rig?" the voice asked doubtfully.

"Right. Get it in here."

I started for the door. The Old Man snapped, "Where are you going?"

"Out," I snapped back. "I want no part of this."

He grabbed me and spun me around. "No, you don't. You know about these creatures; your advice could help."

"Let go of me."

"You'll stay," he said savagely, "strapped down or free to move! I made allowances for your illness, but I've had enough."

I was too weary to buck him. "You're the boss."

THE lab people wheeled in a sort of chair, more like a Sing Sing special than anything else. There were clamps for ankles and knees, wrists and elbows. There was a canvas corselet to restrain the waist and chest, but the back was cut away so that the shoulders of the victim would be free.

They placed it beside the ape's cage, then removed the side of the cage nearest the chair. The ape watched with intent, aware eyes, but his limbs still dangled helplessly. Nevertheless, I became still more disturbed at the cage being opened. Only the Old Man's threat kept me there. The technicians stood back, apparently ready. The outer door opened and several people came in. Among them was Mary.

I was caught off balance; I had been wanting to see her and had tried several times to get word to her through the nurses—but they either could not identify her or had received instructions. Now I saw her under *these* circumstances. I cursed the Old Man to myself. It was no show to bring a woman to, even a woman agent. There ought to be decent limits somewhere.

Mary looked surprised and nodded. I let it go at that; it was no time for small talk. She was

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looking good, though very sober. She was dressed in the costume the nurses had worn, but she did not have the ludicrous helmet and back plate. The others present were men, loaded with recording and stereo equipment as well as other apparatus.

"Ready?" inquired the lab chief.

"Get going," answered the Old Man.

Mary walked straight to the chair and sat down. Two technicians knelt and started fastening the clamps. I watched in a frozen daze. Then I grabbed the Old Man, literally threw him aside, and I was by the chair, kicking the technicians out of the way.

"Mary!" I screamed. "Get up from there!"

The Old Man had his gun on me. "Away from her," he ordered. "You three—grab him and tie him."

I looked at the gun, then down at Mary. She did not move; her feet were already bound. She simply looked at me with compassionate eyes.

"Get up, Mary," I said dully. "I want to sit down."

They removed the chair and brought in a larger one. I could not have used hers; both were tailored to size. When they finished clamping me, I might as well have been cast in concrete. My back began to itch unbearably, although nothing, as yet, had touched it.

Mary was no longer in the room; I had not seen her leave and it did not seem to matter. After I had been prepared, the Old Man laid a hand on my arm, and said quietly, "Thanks, son." I did not answer.

I was not interested enough to watch them handle the parasite behind my back, even if I had been able to turn my head, which I couldn't. Once the ape barked and screamed and someone shouted, "Watch it!"

There was silence, as if everyone was holding his breath. Then something moist touched my neck and I fainted.

WITH the same tingling energy I had experienced before, I came out of the faint, realizing I was in a tight spot, but warily determined to think my way out. I was not afraid; I was contemptuous and sure that I could outwit them.

The Old Man said sharply, "Can you hear me?"

I answered, "Quit shouting."

"Do you remember what we are here for?"

"You want to ask questions. What are you waiting for?"

"*What are you?*"

"That's a silly question. I'm six feet one, more muscle than

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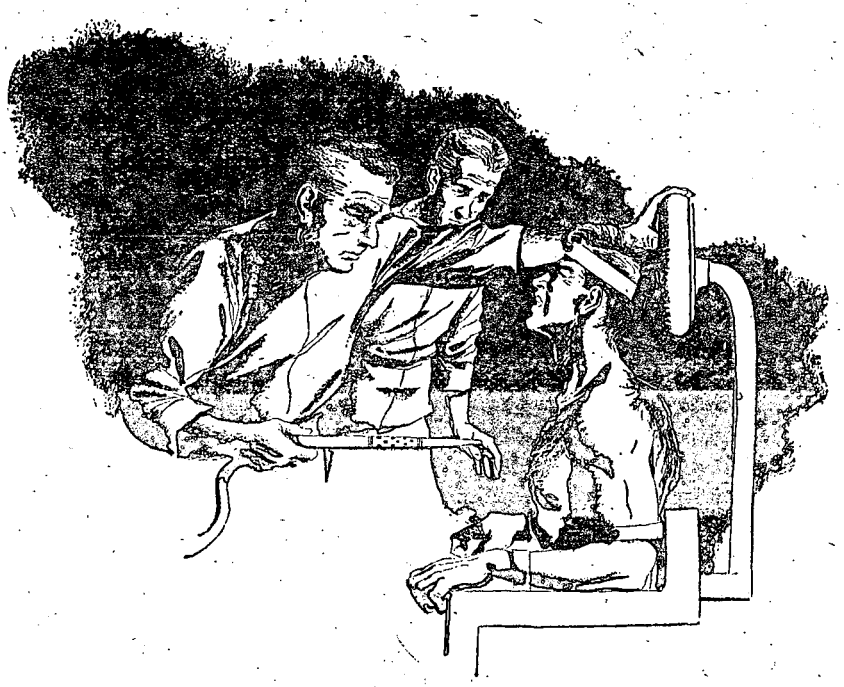

brain, and I weigh—"

"Not you. You know to whom I am talking—you."

"Guessing games?"

The Old Man waited before replying, "It's no good to pretend I don't know what you are."

"Oh, go ahead and pretend."

"You know that I have been studying you all the time you have been living on the body of that ape. I know things which give me an advantage. One—" the Old Man started ticking them off—"you can be killed. Two, you can be hurt. You don't like electric shock and you can't stand the heat that even a man can stand. Three, you are helpless without your host. I could have you removed and you would die. Four, you have no powers except those you borrow from your host. He is helpless. Try your bonds. You must cooperate or die!"

I had already been trying my bonds, finding them, as I ex-

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pected, impossible to escape. This did not worry me. I was oddly contented to be back with my master, to be free of troubles and tensions. My business was to serve; the future would take care of itself. One ankle strap seemed less tight than the other. Possibly I might drag my foot through it. I checked on the arm clamps. If I relaxed completely—

An instruction came at once or I made a decision; the words mean the same, for there was no conflict between my master and me; we were one. Instruction or decision, I knew it was not time to risk an escape. I ran my eyes around the room, trying to figure who was armed. It was my guess that only the Old Man was. That bettered the chances.

Somewhere, deep down, was that ache of guilt and despair never experienced by any but the servants of the masters. I was much too busy, though, to be troubled by it.

"Well?" the Old Man went on. "Do you answer questions or do I punish you?"

"What questions?" I asked. "Up to now, you've been talking nonsense."

The Old Man turned to a technician. "Give me the tickler."

I felt no apprehension, being still busy checking my bonds. If I could tempt him into placing his gun within reach, assuming that I could get one arm free, then I might—

He reached past my shoulders with a rod. I felt a shocking pain. The room blacked out as if a switch had been thrown. I was split apart. For the moment, I was masterless.

The pain left, leaving only searing memory behind. Before I could think coherently, the splitting away had ended and I was again safely under the control of my master. But for the first and only time in my service

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to him, I was not myself free of worry; echoes of his own wild fear and pain were passed on to me.

"Well, how did you like the taste?" asked the Old Man.

The panic washed away; I was again filled with unworried well-being, however wary and watchful. My wrists and ankles, which had begun to pain me, stopped hurting. "Why did you do that?" I asked. "Certainly, you can hurt me—but why?"

"Answer my questions."

"Ask them."

"*What are you?*"

The answer did not come at once. As the Old Man reached for the rod, I heard myself hurriedly saying, "We are the people."

"What people?"

"The only people. We have studied you and we know your ways. We—" I stopped suddenly.

"Keep talking," the Old Man said grimly, and gestured with the rod.

"We come," I went on, "to bring you—" I wanted to talk; the rod was terrifyingly close. But there was some difficulty with words. "To bring you peace," I blurted out.

The Old Man snorted.

"Peace," I went on, "and contentment — and the joy of — of surrender." Surrender was not the right word. I struggled the way one struggles with a foreign language. 'The joy," I repeated, "of . . . *nirvana*." The word fitted and the master was pleased. I felt like a dog being patted for fetching a stick.

"Let me get this," the Old Man said. "You are promising the human race that if we will just surrender, you will take care of us and make us happy. Right?"

"Exactly!"

The Old Man thought about this while looking past my shoulders. He spat on the floor. "You know," he said slowly, "humanity has often been offered that bargain. It never worked out worth a damn."

"Try it yourself," I suggested. "It can be done quickly. Then you will *know*."

He stared this time in my face. "Maybe I owe it to somebody to try it personally. Maybe I will, some day. But right now," he went on briskly, "you have questions to answer. Answer quick and proper and stay healthy. Be slow and I'll step up the current."

I shrank back, feeling dismay and defeat. For a moment, thinking he was going to accept, I had been planning the possibilities of escape.

"Now," he went on, "where do you come from?"

No answer. I felt no urge to answer.

The rod came closer. "Far away!" I burst out.

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"That's no news. Where's your home base, your own planet?" The Old Man waited, then said, "I'll have to touch up your memory." I watched dully, thinking nothing.

"There may be a semantic difficulty," said an assistant. "Different astronomical concepts."

"Why?" asked the Old Man. "That slug knows what his host knows; we've proved that." But he turned back and started a different tack. "See here, you savvy the Solar System. Is your planet inside it or outside?"

I hesitated, then answered, "All planets are ours."

The Old Man pulled at his lip. "I wonder," he mused, "what you mean. Never mind. You can claim the whole damned universe, but, where do your ships come from?"

I sat silent, unable to tell him.

Suddenly he reached behind me. I felt one smashing blow. "Talk, damn you! What planet? Mars? Venus? Jupiter? Saturn? Uranus? Neptune? Pluto?"

As he mentioned them, I briefly saw them—though I have never been as far off Earth as the Space Stations. When he came to the right one, I knew — and the thought was instantly snatched from me.

I heard myself saying, "None of them. Our home is much farther away."

He looked past my shoulders and then into my eyes. "I think you are lying. Maybe you need some juice to keep you honest."

"No, no!"

"No harm to try." Slowly he thrust the rod behind me. I knew the answer again and was about to give it, when something froze my throat. Then the pain started.

I was being torn apart. I tried to talk, anything to stop the pain —but I wasn't allowed to.

Through a blur of pain I saw the Old Man's face, shimmering and floating. "Had enough?" he asked. I started to answer, and choked and gagged helplessly, dumbly. I saw him reach out again with the rod.

There was, as I had told the Old Man, a limit to what a man could take, even under a master's control. I reached that limit and burst into pieces.

THEY were leaning over me. Someone said, "He's coming around."

The Old Man's face was over mine. "You all right, son?" he asked anxiously. I turned my face away.

"One side, please," another voice said. "Let me give him the injection." The speaker knelt by me and gave me a shot. He stood up, looked at his hands, then wiped them on his shorts.

Gyro, I thought absently, *or something like it.* Whatever it

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was, it was pulling me back together. Shortly I sat up, unassisted. I was still in the cage room, directly in front of that damnable chair.

I started to get to my feet.

The Old Man gave me a hand, but I shook him off.

"Sorry," he answered, then snapped, "Jones! You and Ito get the litter. Take him to the infirmary. Doc, you go along."

"Certainly." The man who had given me the shot started to take my arm.

I drew back. "Keep your hands off me!"

The doctor looked at the Old Man, who shrugged, then motioned them all back. Alone, I went through the door and past the outer one into the corridor. I paused there, looked at my wrists and ankles, and decided that I might as well go to the infirmary. Doris would take care of me and then maybe I could sleep. I felt as if I had gone fifteen rounds and lost them all.

"Sam! Sam!"

I knew that voice. Mary hurried up and was standing before me, looking at me with great sorrowful eyes. "Oh, Sam! What have they done to you?" Her voice was so choked that I could hardly understand her.

"You should know," I answered and had strength enough left to slap her. "Bitch!"

MY room was still unoccupied, but I did not find Doris. I closed the door, then lay face down on the bed and tried to stop thinking or feeling. Presently I heard a gasp, and opened one eye.

There was Doris. I felt her gentle hands on me. "Why, you poor, poor baby! Stay there, don't move now. I'll hurry right out and get the doctor."

"No."

"But you've got to have the doctor."

"I won't see him. *You* help me."

She did not answer. I heard her go out. She came back shortly — I think it was shortly — and started to bathe my wounds. I wanted to scream when she touched my back. But she dressed it quickly and said, "Over easy, now."

"I'll stay face down."

"No. I want you to drink something. That's a good boy."

I turned over, with her doing most of the work, and drank what she gave me. After a bit I went to sleep.

I seem to remember being awakened, seeing the Old Man and cursing him. The doctor was there, too. Or the whole thing could have been a dream.

Miss Briggs woke me and Doris brought me breakfast; it was as if I had never been off the sick

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list. I was not in too bad shape though I felt as if I had gone over Niagara Falls in a barrel. There were dressings on both arms and both legs where I had cut myself on the clamps, but no bones were broken. Where I was sick was in my soul.

Don't misunderstand me. The Old Man could send me into a dangerous spot. That was what I had signed up for. But I had not signed up for what he had done to me. He knew what made me tick and he had used it to force me into something I would never have done willingly.

It was the Old Man that really hurt. Mary? There have always been female spies, and the young and pretty ones have always used the same tools. But she should not have agreed to use them against a fellow agent—at least, she should not have used them against *me*.

Not very logical, is it? It was to me. They could go ahead with Operation Parasite without me. I owned a cabin in the Adirondacks; I had stuff there in deep freeze to carry me a year, maybe more. I had plenty of tempus pills; I would go up there and use them—and the world could save itself, or go to hell, without me.

If anyone came within a hundred yards, he would either show a bare back or be burned down.

I HAD to tell somebody about the deal I'd gotten, and only Doris was handy. She was indignant. Indignant? She was as sore as a boiled owl. Being a nurse, she had dressed a lot worse than what they had done to me, but this had been done *by our own people*. I blurted out how I felt about Mary's part in it.

"Do I understand that you had wanted to *marry* this girl?"

"Correct. Stupid, ain't I?"

"Then she knew what she could do to you. It wasn't fair." She stopped massaging me, her eyes snapping. "I've never met your redhead, but if I do, I'll scratch her face!"

I smiled wanly at her. "You're a good kid, Doris. I believe you would play fair with a man."

"Oh, I've pulled some fast ones. But if I did anything halfway like that, I'd have to break every mirror I own."

Mary showed up. The first I knew was hearing Doris say angrily, "You can't come in."

Mary's voice answered, "I'm going in."

"Get back or I'll pull that hennaed hair out by the roots!"

There were sounds of a scuffle and the *smack* of someone getting slapped. I yelled, "Hey! What goes on?"

They appeared in the doorway together. Doris was breathing hard and her hair was mussed.

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Mary managed to look dignified, but there was a bright red patch on her cheek just about the size of Doris's hand.

Doris caught her breath and said, "You get out. He doesn't want to see you."

Mary said, "I'll hear that from him."

I looked at them both. "Oh, what the hell, she's here and I've got some things to tell her. Thanks for trying, Doris."

Doris said, "You're a fool," and flounced out.

Mary came over to the bed. "Sam," she said. "Sam."

"My name isn't Sam."

"I've never known your right name."

It was no time to explain that my parents had burdened me with Elihu. I answered, 'What of it? Sam will do.'

"Sam," she repeated. "Oh, Sam, my dear."

"I am not your dear."

She inclined her head. "Yes, I know. I don't know why. Sam, I came to find out why you hate me. Perhaps I can't change it, but I must know."

I made a sound of disgust. "After what you did, you don't know why? Mary, you may be a cold fish, but you aren't stupid."

She shook her head. "Just the reverse, Sam. I'm not cold, but I'm frequently stupid. Look at me, please—I know what they did to you. I know that you let it be done to save me from it. I know and I'm deeply grateful. But I don't know why you hate me. I did not ask you to do it and I did not want you to do it."

I reared up on one elbow. "You sat down in that trick chair knowing that I would never let you go through with it. You *knew* that, whether your devious female mind admitted it or not. The Old Man could not have forced me to with a gun, not even with drugs. *You* could. You did."

She grew steadily paler, until her face was almost green against her hair. "Sam, that is not the way it was. I didn't know you were going to be there. I was terribly startled. But I had to go through with it; I had promised."

"That covers everything. A schoolgirl promise."

"No, Sam. Not a schoolgirl promise."

"It doesn't matter whether you are telling the truth about knowing that I would be in there. The point is that *you* were there and *I* was there—and you could figure what would happen if you did what you did."

"That's the way it looks to you and I can't dispute the facts."

"Hardly."

She stood very still for a long time. I let her. Finally she said, "Sam, once you said something about wanting to marry me."

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"That was another day."

"I didn't expect you to repeat the offer. But there was a sort of corollary. No matter what you think of me, I want to tell you that I am deeply grateful for what you did for me. Miss Barkis is willing, Sam. You understand me?"

I grinned at her. "So help me, the workings of the female mind delight and astound me. You always think you can cancel anything at all with that one trump play." I continued to grin while she turned red. "I won't inconvenience you by taking up your generous offer."

She came back at me in a steady voice. "I let myself in for that. Nevertheless, I meant it. That or anything else I can ever do for you."

I sank back and lay down. "Sure, you can do something for me."

Her face lit up. "What?"

"Quit bothering me. Go away. I'm tired."

THE Old Man put his head in late that afternoon. "I want to talk to you," he started in.

"*I* don't want to talk to *you*. Get out."

He ignored it and came in. "Mind if I sit?"

"You seem to be doing so."

He ignored that, too. "You know, son, you are one of my best boys, but sometimes you are hasty."

"Don't let that worry you," I answered. "As soon as the doctor lets me up, I'm through."

He was not hearing anything that he did not choose to hear. "You jump to conclusions. Now take this girl Mary—"

"*You* take her."

"You jumped all over her without knowing the score. You've got her all upset. Why, you may have ruined a good agent for me."

"Look, I'm weeping for both of you."

"You think she let herself be used as bait. Well, you've got it slightly wrong. She was being used, but *I* was using *her*. I planned it that way."

"I know you did."

"Then why blame her?"

"Because you couldn't have carried it out without her cooperation. It's big of you, you no-good, heartless bastard, to take all the blame—but you can't."

He did not hear my profanity, either. "You understand everything but the key point, which is that *the girl didn't know*."

"Hell's bells, she was there!"

"So she was. Son, did I ever lie to you?"

"No," I admitted, "but I don't think you would hesitate."

He answered, "Maybe I deserve that. You'll just have to test it for yourself and make up

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your mind whether or not I'm lying. That girl didn't know you were going to be in that room. She didn't have the faintest suspicion that I didn't mean for her to go through with it, or that I had already decided that you were the only party who would suit me, even if I had to have you tied down and forced—which I would have done, if I hadn't had a double whammy up my sleeve to trick you into volunteering. Hell's bells yourself, son; she didn't even know you were off the sick list."

I wanted to believe it; so I did my damnedest not to.

"Look at me!" he added. "There is something I want to rub into your scalp. First off, everybody —including me—appreciates what you did, regardless of motives. I'm putting in a letter and no doubt you'll get a medal. That stands whether you stay with the Section or not. But don't give yourself airs as a little tin hero—"

"I won't!"

"—because that medal is going to the wrong person. Mary ought to get it. Now shut up. I'm not through. You had to be forced into it. No criticism; you had been through plenty. But Mary was a real, Simon-pure volunteer. When she sat down in that chair, she didn't expect any last minute reprieve and she had every reason to believe that, if she got up

alive, her mind would be gone, which is worse. What I'm trying to tell you is—this one is more of a man than you are and you've done her a serious wrong."

I was so churned up that I could not judge whether he was telling the truth, or manipulating me again. I said, "Maybe I lashed out at the wrong person. But if what you say is true—"

"It is."

"—it doesn't make what you did any sweeter. It makes it worse."

He took it without flinching. "Son, I'm sorry if I've lost your respect. But I can't be choosy any more than a commander can in battle. Less, because I fight with different weapons. I've always been able to shoot my own dog. Maybe that's bad, but that is what my job takes. If you are

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ever in my shoes, you'll have to do it, too."

"I'm not likely to be."

"Why don't you rest up and think about it?"

"I'll take leave — *terminal* leave."

"Very well." He started to leave.

I said, "You made me one promise and I'm holding you to it. About that parasite—you said I could kill it, personally. Are you through with it?"

"Yes, but—"

I started to get up. "No buts. Give me your gun; I'll do it now."

"You can't. It's already dead."

"*What!* You *promised* me."

"I know. But it died while we were trying to force you—force it—to talk."

I started to shake with laughter and could not stop.

The Old Man shook me. "Snap out of it! I'm sorry about what I did, but there's nothing to laugh at."

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"Sure there is," I answered, sobbing and chuckling. "It's the funniest thing that ever happened. All that for nothing. You dirtied yourself and you loused up me and Mary—and all for no use."

"What gave you that idea?"

"You didn't even get small change out of it—out of us. You didn't learn anything you didn't know before."

"It was a bigger success than you'd ever guess, son. True, we didn't squeeze anything out of it directly, before it died, but we got something out of you."

"Me?"

"Last night. We put you through it last night. You were doped, psyched, brain-waved, analyzed, wrung out and hung out to dry. The parasite spilled things to you and they were still there for the hypno-analysts to pick up after you were free of it."

"What, for instance?"

"We know where they come from and can fight back—Titan, sixth satellite of Saturn."

When he said it, I felt a gagging constriction of my throat and I knew that he was right.

"You certainly fought before we could get it," he went on reminiscently. "We had to hold you down to keep you from hurting yourself—more."

He threw his game leg over the edge of the bed and struck a cigarette. He seemed anxious to be friendly. As for me, I did not want to fight with him; my head was spinning and I had things to get straight. Titan. That was a long way out in space. Mars was the farthest men had ever been, unless the Seagraves Expedition, the one that never came back, had reached the Jovian moons.

Still, we could get all the way to Saturn if we wanted to.

Finally he got up to go. He had limped to the door when I stopped him. "Dad—"

I had not called him that in years. He turned, his expression surprised and defenseless. "Yes, son?"

"Why did you and Mother name me Elihu?"

"Eh? Why, it was your maternal grandfather's name."

"Not enough reason, I'd say."

"Perhaps not." He turned and again I stopped him.

"Dad, what sort of a person was my mother?"

"Your mother? I don't know exactly how to tell you. Well—she was pretty much like Mary. Yes, son, a great deal like her." He stumped out without giving me further chance to talk.

—ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

Continued Next Month

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The Sense of Wonder

By MILTON LESSER

When nobody aboard ship remembers where it's going, how can they tell when it has arrived?

EVERY day for a week now, Rikud had come to the viewport to watch the great changeless sweep of space. He could not quite explain the feelings within him; they were so alien, so unnatural. But ever since the engines somewhere in the rear of the world had changed their tone, from the steady whining Rikud had heard all twenty-five years of his life, to the sullen roar that came to his ears now, the feelings had grown.

If anyone else had noticed the change, he failed to mention it. This disturbed Rikud, although he could not tell why. And, because he had realized this odd difference in himself, he kept it locked up inside him.

Today, space looked somehow different. The stars—it was a meaningless concept to Rikud, but that was what everyone called the bright pinpoints of light on the black backdrop in the viewport—were not apparent in the speckled profusion Rikud had always known. Instead, there

Illustrated by HARRY ROSENBAUM

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was more of the blackness, and one very bright star set apart by itself in the middle of the viewport.

If he had understood the term, Rikud would have told himself this was odd. His head ached with the half-born thought. It was—it was—what was it?

Someone was clomping up the companionway behind Rikud. He turned and greeted gray-haired old Chuls.

"In five more years," the older man chided, "you'll be ready to sire children. And all you can do in the meantime is gaze out at the stars."

Rikud knew he should be exercising now, or bathing in the rays of the health-lamps. It had never occurred to him that he didn't feel like it; he just didn't, without comprehending.

Chuls' reminder fostered uneasiness. Often Rikud had dreamed of the time he would be thirty and a father. Whom would the Calculator select as his mate? The first time this idea had occurred to him, Rikud ignored it. But it came again, and each time it left him with a feeling he could not explain. Why should he think thoughts that no other man had? Why should he think he was thinking such thoughts, when it always embroiled him in a hopeless, infinite confusion that left him with a headache?

Chuls said, "It is time for my bath in the health-rays. I saw you here and knew it was your time, too . . ."

His voice trailed off. Rikud knew that something which he could not explain had entered the older man's head for a moment, but it had departed almost before Chuls knew of its existence.

"I'll go with you," Rikud told him.

A HARDLY perceptible purple glow pervaded the air in the room of the health-rays. Perhaps two score men lay about, naked, under the ray tubes. Chuls stripped himself and selected the space under a vacant tube. Rikud, for his part, wanted to get back to the viewport and watch the one new bright star. He had the distinct notion it was growing larger every moment. He turned to go, but the door clicked shut and a metallic voice said. "Fifteen minutes under the tubes, please."

Rikud muttered to himself and undressed. The world had begun to annoy him. Now why shouldn't a man be permitted to do what he wanted, when he wanted to do it? *There* was a strange thought, and Rikud's brain whirled once more down the tortuous course of half-formed questions and unsatisfactory answers.

He had even wondered what it was like to get hurt. No one ever

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got hurt. Once, here in this same ray room, he had had the impulse to hurl himself head-first against the wall, just to see what would happen. But something soft had cushioned the impact—something which had come into being just for the moment and then abruptly passed into non-being again, something which was as impalpable as air.

Rikud had been stopped in this action, although there was no real authority to stop him. This puzzled him, because somehow he felt that there should have been authority. A long time ago the reading machine in the library had told him of the elders — a meaningless term—who had governed the world. They told you to do something and you did it, but that was silly, because now no one told you to do anything. You only listened to the buzzer.

And Rikud could remember the rest of what the reading machine had said. There had been a revolt—again a term without any real meaning, a term that could have no reality outside of the reading machine—and the elders were overthrown. Here Rikud had been lost utterly. The people had decided that they did not know where they were going, or why, and that it was unfair that the elders alone had this authority. They were born and they lived and they died as the elders directed, like little cogs in a great machine. Much of this Rikud could not understand, but he knew enough to realize that the reading machine had sided with the people against the elders, and it said the people had won.

Now in the health room, Rikud felt a warmth in the rays. Grudgingly, he had to admit to himself that it was not unpleasant. He could see the look of easy contentment on Chuls' face as the rays fanned down upon him, bathing his old body in a forgotten magic which, many generations before Rikud's time, had negated the necessity for a knowledge of medicine. But when, in another ten years, Chuls would perish of old age, the rays would no longer suffice. Nothing would, for Chuls. Rikud often thought of his own death, still seventy-five years in the future, not without a sense of alarm. Yet old Chuls seemed heedless, with only a decade to go.

Under the tube at Rikud's left lay Crifer. The man was short and heavy through the shoulders and chest, and he had a lame foot. Every time Rikud looked at that foot, it was with a sense of satisfaction. True, this was the only case of its kind, the exception to the rule, but it proved the world was not perfect. Rikud was guiltily glad when he saw Crifer limp.

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But, if anyone else saw it, he never said a word. Not even Crifer.

NOW Crifer said, "I've been reading again, Rikud."

"Yes?" Almost no one read any more, and the library was heavy with the smell of dust. Reading represented initiative on the part of Crifer; it meant that, in the two unoccupied hours before sleep, he went to the library and listened to the reading machine. Everyone else simply sat about and talked. That was the custom. Everyone did it.

But if he wasn't reading himself, Rikud usually went to sleep. All the people ever talked about was what they had done during the day, and it was always the same.

"Yes," said Crifer. "I found a book about the stars. They're also called astronomy, I think."

This was a new thought to Rikud, and he propped his head up on one elbow. "What did you find out?"

"That's about all. They're just called astronomy, I think."

"Well, where's the book?" Rikud would read it tomorrow.

"I left it in the library. You can find several of them under 'astronomy,' with a cross-reference under 'stars.' They're synonymous terms."

"You know," Rikud said, sitting up now, "the stars in the viewport are changing."

"Changing?" Crifer questioned the fuzzy concept as much as he questioned what it might mean in this particular case.

"Yes, there are less of them, and one is bigger and brighter than the others."

"Astronomy says some stars are variable," Crifer offered, but Rikud knew his lame-footed companion understood the word no better than he did.

Over on Rikud's right, Chuls began to dress. "Variability," he told them, "is a contradictory term. Nothing is variable. It can't be."

"I'm only saying what I read in the book," Crifer protested mildly.

"Well, it's wrong. Variability and change are two words without meaning."

"People grow old," Rikud suggested.

A buzzer signified that his fifteen minutes under the rays were up, and Chuls said, "It's almost time for me to eat."

Rikud frowned. Chuls hadn't even seen the connection between the two concepts, yet it was so clear. Or was it? He had had it a moment ago, but now it faded, and change and old were just two words.

His own buzzer sounded a moment later, and it was with a

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strange feeling of elation that he dressed and made his way back to the viewport. When he passed the door which led to the women's half of the world, however, he paused. He wanted to open that door and see a woman. He had been told about them and he had seen pictures, and he dimly remembered his childhood among women. But his feelings had changed; this was different. Again there were inexplicable feelings—strange channelings of Rikud's energy in new and confusing directions.

He shrugged and reserved the thought for later. He wanted to see the stars again.

THE view had changed, and the strangeness of it made Rikud's pulses leap with excitement. All the stars were paler now than before, and where Rikud had seen the one bright central star, he now saw a globe of light, white with a tinge of blue in it, and so bright that it hurt his eyes to look.

Yes, hurt! Rikud looked and looked until his eyes teared and he had to turn away. Here was an unknown factor which the perfect world failed to control. But how could a star change into a blinking blue-white globe—if, indeed, that was the star Rikud had seen earlier? There was that word change again. Didn't it have something to do with age? Rikud couldn't remember, and he suddenly wished he could read Crifer's book on astronomy, which meant the same as stars. Except that it was variable, which was like change, being tied up somehow with age.

Presently Rikud became aware that his eyes were not tearing any longer, and he turned to look at the viewport. What he saw now was so new that he couldn't at first accept it. Instead, he blinked and rubbed his eyes, sure that the ball of blue-white fire somehow had damaged them. But the new view persisted.

Of stars there were few, and of the blackness, almost nothing. Gone, too, was the burning globe. Something loomed there in the port, so huge that it spread out over almost the entire surface. Something big and round, all grays and greens and browns, and something for which Rikud had no name.

A few moments more, and Rikud no longer could see the sphere. A section of it had expanded outward and assumed the rectangular shape of the viewport, and its size as well. It seemed neatly sheered down the middle, so that on one side Rikud saw an expanse of brown and green, and on the other, blue.

Startled, Rikud leaped back. The sullen roar in the rear of the

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world had ceased abruptly. Instead an ominous silence, broken at regular intervals by a sharp booming.

Change—

"Won't you eat, Rikud?" Chuls called from somewhere down below.

"Damn the man," Rikud thought. Then aloud: "Yes, I'll eat. Later."

"It's time . . ." Chuls' voice trailed off again, impotently.

But Rikud forgot the old man completely. A new idea occurred to him, and for a while he struggled with it. What he saw—what he had always seen, except that now there was the added factor of change—perhaps did not exist *in* the viewport.

Maybe it existed *through* the viewport.

That was maddening. Rikud turned again to the port, where he could see nothing but an obscuring cloud of white vapor, murky, swirling, more confusing than ever.

"Chuls," he called, remembering, "come here."

"I am here," said a voice at his elbow.

Rikud whirled on the little figure and pointed to the swirling cloud of vapor. "What do you see?"

Chuls looked. "The viewport, of course."

"What else?"

"Else? Nothing."

Anger welled up inside Rikud. "All right," he said, "listen. What do you hear?"

"Broom, brroom, brrroom!" Chuls imitated the intermittent blasting of the engines. "I'm hungry, Rikud."

The old man turned and strode off down the corridor toward the dining room, and Rikud was glad to be alone once more.

NOW the vapor had departed, except for a few tenuous whisps. For a moment Rikud thought he could see the gardens rearward in the world. But that was silly. What were the gardens doing in the viewport? And besides, Rikud had the distinct feeling that here was something far vaster than the gardens, although all of it existed in the viewport which was no wider than the length of his body. The gardens, moreover, did not jump and dance before his eyes the way the viewport gardens did. Nor did they spin. Nor did the trees grow larger with every jolt.

Rikud sat down hard. He blinked.

The world had come to rest on the garden of the viewport.

FOR a whole week that view did not change, and Rikud had come to accept it as fact. There—through the viewport and

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in it—was a garden. A garden larger than the entire world, a garden of plants which Rikud had never seen before, although he had always liked to stroll through the world's garden and he had come to know every plant well. Nevertheless, it was a garden.

He told Chuls, but Chuls had responded, "It is the viewport."

Crifer, on the other hand, wasn't so sure. "It looks like the garden," he admitted to Rikud. "But why should the garden be in the viewport?"

Somehow, Rikud knew this question for a healthy sign. But he could not tell them of his most amazing thought of all. The change in the viewport could mean only one thing. The world had been walking — the word seemed all wrong to Rikud, but he could think of no other, unless it were running. The world had been walking somewhere. That somewhere was the garden and the world had arrived.

"It is an old picture of the garden," Chuls suggested, "and the plants are different."

"Then they've changed?"

"No, merely different."

"Well, what about the viewport? *It* changed. Where are the stars? Where are they, Chuls, if it did not change?"

"The stars come out at night."

"So there is a change from day to night!"

"I didn't say that. The stars simply shine at night. Why should they shine during the day when the world wants them to shine only at night?"

"Once they shone all the time."

"Naturally," said Crifer, becoming interested. "They are variable."

RIKUD regretted that he never had had the chance to read that book on astronomy. He hadn't been reading too much lately. The voice of the reading machine had begun to bore him. He said, "Well, variable or not, our whole perspective has changed."

And when Chuls looked away in disinterest, Rikud became angry. If only the man would realize! If only anyone would realize! It all seemed so obvious. If he, Rikud, walked from one part of the world to another, it was with a purpose—to eat, or to sleep, or perhaps to bathe in the health-rays. Now if the world had walked from—somewhere, through the vast star-speckled darkness and to the great garden outside, this also was purposeful. The world had arrived at the garden for a reason. But if everyone lived as if the world still stood in blackness, how could they find the nature of that purpose?

"I will eat," Chuls said, breaking Rikud's revery.

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Damn the man, all he did was eat!

Yet he did have initiative after a sort. He knew when to eat. Because he was hungry.

And Rikud, too, was hungry.

Differently.

HE had long wondered about the door in the back of the library, and now, as Crifer sat cross-legged on one of the dusty tables, reading machine and book on astronomy or stars in his lap, Rikud approached the door.

"What's in here?" he demanded.

"It's a door, I think," said Crifer.

"I know, but what's beyond it?"

"Beyond it? Oh, you mean *through* the door."

"Yes."

"Well," Crifer scratched his head, "I don't think anyone ever opened it. It's only a door."

"I will," said Rikud.

"You will what?"

"Open it. Open the door and look inside."

A long pause. Then, "Can you do it?"

"I think so."

"You can't, probably. How can anyone go where no one has been before? There's nothing. It just isn't. It's only a door, Rikud."

"No—" Rikud began, but the words faded off into a sharp intake of breath. Rikud had turned the knob and pushed. The door opened silently, and Crifer said, "Doors are variable, too, I think."

Rikud saw a small room, perhaps half a dozen paces across, at the other end of which was another door, just like the first. Halfway across, Rikud heard a voice not unlike that of the reading machine.

He missed the beginning, but then:

—therefore, permit no unauthorized persons to go through this door. The machinery in the next room is your protection against the rigors of space. A thousand years from now, journey's end, you may have discarded it for something better — who knows? But if you have not, then here is your protection. As nearly as possible, this ship is a perfect, self-sustaining world. It is more than that: it is human-sustaining as well. Try to hurt yourself and the ship will not permit it—within limits, of course. But you can *damage the ship, and to avoid any possibility of that, no unauthorized persons are to be permitted through this door—*

Rikud gave the voice up as hopeless. There were too many confusing words. What in the world was an unauthorized person? More interesting than that,

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however, was the second door. Would it lead to another voice? Rikud hoped that it wouldn't.

When he opened the door a strange new noise filled his ears, a gentle humming, punctuated by a *throb-throb-throb* which sounded not unlike the booming of the engines last week, except that this new sound didn't blast nearly so loudly against his eardrums. And what met Rikud's eyes — he blinked and looked again, but it was still there—cogs and gears and wheels and nameless things all strange and beautiful because they shone with a luster unfamiliar to him.

"Odd," Rikud said aloud. Then he thought, "Now there's a good word, but no one quite seems to know its meaning."

Odder still was the third door. Rikud suddenly thought there might exist an endless succession of them, especially when the third one opened on a bare tunnel which led to yet another door.

Only this one was different. In it Rikud saw the viewport. But how? The viewport stood on the other end of the world. It did seem smaller, and, although it looked out on the garden, Rikud sensed that the topography was different. Then the garden extended even farther than he had thought. It was endless, extending all the way to a ridge of mounds way off in the distance.

And this door one could walk through, into the garden. Rikud put his hand on the door, all the while watching the garden through the new viewport. He began to turn the handle.

Then he trembled.

What would he do out in the garden?

He couldn't go alone. He'd die of the strangeness. It was a silly thought; no one ever died of anything until he was a hundred. Rikud couldn't fathom the rapid thumping of his heart. And Rikud's mouth felt dry; he wanted to swallow, but couldn't.

Slowly, he took his hand off the door lever. He made his way back through the tunnel and then through the room of machinery and finally through the little room with the confusing voice to Crifer.

By the time he reached the lame-footed man, Rikud was running. He did not dare once to look back. He stood shaking at Crifer's side, and sweat covered him in a clammy film. He never wanted to look at the garden again. Not when he knew there was a door through which he could walk and then might find himself in the garden.

It was so big.

THREE or four days passed before Rikud calmed himself enough to talk about his experi-

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ence. When he did, only Crifer seemed at all interested, yet the lame-footed man's mind was inadequate to cope with the situation. He suggested that the viewport might also be variable and Rikud found himself wishing that his friend had never read that book on astronomy.

Chuls did not believe Rikud at all. "There are not that many doors in the world," he said. "The library has a door and there is a door to the women's quarters; in five years, the Calculator will send you through that. But there are no others."

Chuls smiled an indulgent smile and Rikud came nearer to him. "Now, by the world, there are two other doors!"

Rikud began to shout, and everyone looked at him queerly.

"What are you doing that for?" demanded Wilm, who was shorter even than Crifer, but had no lame foot.

"Doing what?"

"Speaking so loudly when Chuls, who is close, obviously has no trouble hearing you."

"Maybe yelling will make him understand."

Crifer hobbled about on his good foot, doing a meaningless little jig. "Why don't we go see?" he suggested. Then, confused, he frowned.

"Well, I won't go," Chuls replied. "There's no reason to go. If Rikud has been imagining things, why should I?"

"I imagined nothing. I'll show you—"

"You'll show me nothing because I won't go."

Rikud grabbed Chuls' blouse with his big fist. Then, startled by what he did, his hands began to tremble. But he held on, and he tugged at the blouse.

"Stop that," said the older man, mildly.

CRIFER hopped up and down. "Look what Rikud's doing! I don't know what he's doing, but look. He's holding Chuls' blouse."

"Stop that," repeated Chuls, his face reddening.

"Only if you'll go with me." Rikud was panting.

Chuls tugged at his wrist. By this time a crowd had gathered. Some of them watched Crifer jump up and down, but most of them watched Rikud holding Chuls' blouse.

"I think I can do that," declared Wilm, clutching a fistful of Crifer's shirt.

Presently, the members of the crowd had pretty well paired off, each partner grabbing for his companion's blouse. They giggled and laughed and some began to hop up and down as Crifer had done.

A buzzer sounded and auto-

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matically Rikud found himself releasing Chuls.

Chuls said, forgetting the incident completely, "Time to retire."

In a moment, the room was cleared. Rikud stood alone. He cleared his throat and listened to the sound, all by itself in the stillness. What would have happened if they hadn't retired? But they always did things punctually like that, whenever the buzzer sounded. They ate with the buzzer, bathed in the health-rays with it, slept with it.

What would they do if the buzzer stopped buzzing?

This frightened Rikud, although he didn't know why. He'd like it, though. Maybe then he could take them outside with him to the big garden of the two viewports. And then he wouldn't be afraid because he could huddle close to them and he wouldn't be alone.

RIKUD heard the throbbing again as he stood in the room of the machinery. For a long time he watched the wheels and cogs and gears spinning and humming. He watched for he knew not how long. And then he began to wonder. If he destroyed the wheels and the cogs and the gears, would the buzzer stop? It probably would, because, as Rikud saw it, he was clearly an "unauthorized person." He had heard the voice again upon entering the room.

He found a metal rod, bright and shiny, three feet long and half as wide as his arm. He tugged at it and it came loose from the wires that held it in place. He hefted it carefully for a moment, and then he swung the bar into the mass of metal. Each time he heard a grinding, crashing sound. He looked as the gears and cogs and wheels crumbled under his blows, shattered by the strength of his arm.

Almost casually he strode about the room, but his blows were not casual. Soon his easy strides had given way to frenzied running. Rikud smashed everything in sight.

When the lights winked out, he stopped. Anyway, by that time the room was a shambles of twisted, broken metal. He laughed, softly at first, but presently he was roaring, and the sound doubled and redoubled in his ears because now the throbbing had stopped.

He opened the door and ran through the little corridor to the smaller viewport. Outside he could see the stars, and, dimly, the terrain beneath them. But everything was so dark that only the stars shone clearly. All else was bathed in a shadow of unreality.

Rikud never wanted to do anything more than he wanted to

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open that door. But his hands trembled too much when he touched it, and once, when he pressed his face close against the viewport, there in the darkness something bright flashed briefly through the sky and was gone.

Whimpering, he fled.

ALL around Rikud were darkness and hunger and thirst. The buzzer did not sound because Rikud had silenced it forever. And no one went to eat or drink. Rikud himself had fumbled through the blackness and the whimpering to the dining room, his tongue dry and swollen, but the smooth belt that flowed with water and with savory dishes did not run any more. The machinery, Rikud realized, also was responsible for food.

Chuls said, over and over, "I'm hungry."

"We will eat and we will drink when the buzzer tells us," Wilm replied confidently.

"It won't any more," Rikud said.

"What won't?"

"The buzzer will never sound again. I broke it."

Crifer growled. "I know. You shouldn't have done it. That was a bad thing you did, Rikud."

"It was not bad. The world has moved through the blackness and the stars and now we should go outside to live in the big garden there beyond the viewport."

"That's ridiculous," Chuls said.

Even Crifer now was angry at Rikud. "He broke the buzzer and no one can eat. I hate Rikud, I think."

There was a lot of noise in the darkness, and someone else said, "I hate Rikud." Then everyone was saying it.

Rikud was sad. Soon he would die, because no one would go outside with him and he could not go outside alone. In five more years he would have had a woman, too. He wondered if it was dark and hungry in the women's quarters. Did women eat?

Perhaps they ate plants. Once, in the garden, Rikud had broken off a frond and tasted it. It had been bitter, but not unpleasant. Maybe the plants in the viewport would even be better.

"We will not be hungry if we go outside," he said. "We can eat there."

"We can eat if the buzzer sounds, but it is broken," Chuls said dully.

Crifer shrilled, "Maybe it is only variable and will buzz again."

"No," Rikud assured him. "It won't."

"Then you broke it and I hate you," said Crifer. "We should break you, too, to show you how it is to be broken."

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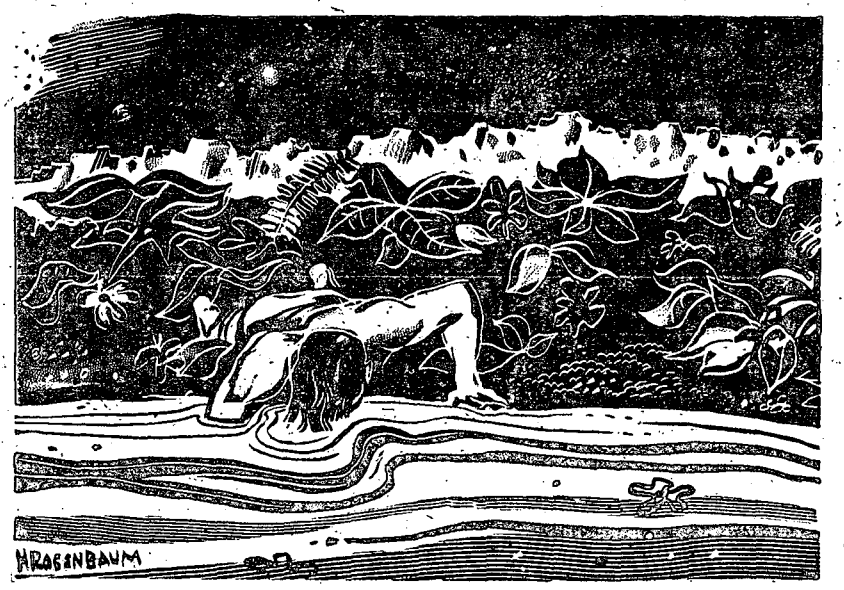

"We must go outside—through the viewport." Rikud listened to the odd gurgling sound his stomach made.

A hand reached out in the darkness and grabbed at his head. He heard Crifer's voice. "I have Rikud's head." The voice was nasty, hostile.

Crifer, more than anyone, had been his friend. But now that he had broken the machinery, Crifer was his enemy, because Crifer came nearer to understanding the situation than anyone except Rikud.

The hand reached out again, and it struck Rikud hard across the face. "I hit him! I hit him!"

Other hands reached out, and Rikud stumbled. He fell and then someone was on top of him, and he struggled. He rolled and was up again, and he did not like the sound of the angry voices. Someone said, "Let us do to Rikud what he said he did to the machinery." Rikud ran. In the darkness, his feet prodded many bodies. There were those who were too weak to rise. Rikud, too, felt a strange light-headedness and a gnawing hurt in his stomach. But it didn't matter. He heard the angry voices and the feet pounding behind him, and

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he wanted only to get away.

It was dark and he was hungry and everyone who was strong enough to run was chasing him, but every time he thought of the garden outside, and how big it was, the darkness and the hunger and the people chasing him were unimportant. It was so big that it would swallow him up completely ond positively.

He became sickly giddy thinking about it.

But if he didn't open the door and go into the garden outside, he would die because he had no food and no water and his stomach gurgled and grumbled and hurt. And everyone was chasing him.

He stumbled through the darkness and felt his way back to the library, through the inner door and into the room with the voice —but the voice didn't speak this time—through its door and into the place of machinery. Behind him, he could hear the voices at the first door, and he thought for a moment that no one would come after him. But he heard Crifer yell something, and then feet pounding in the passage.

Rikud tripped over something and sprawled awkwardly across the floor. He felt a sharp hurt in

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his head, and when he reached up to touch it with his hands there in the darkness, his fingers came away wet.

He got up slowly and opened the next door. The voices behind him were closer now. Light streamed in through the viewport. After the darkness, it frightened Rikud and it made his eyes smart, and he could hear those behind him retreating to a safe distance. But their voices were not far away, and he knew they would come after him because they wanted to break him.

Rikud looked out upon the garden and he trembled. Out there was life. The garden stretched off in unthinkable immensity to the cluster of low mounds against the bright blue which roofed the many plants. If plants could live out there as they did within the world, then so could people. Rikud and his people *should*. This was why the world had moved across the darkness and the stars for all Rikud's lifetime and more. But he was afraid.

He reached up and grasped the handle of the door and he saw that his fingers were red with the wetness which had come from his hurt head. Slowly he slipped to the cool floor—how his head was burning! — and for a long time he lay there, thinking he would never rise again. Inside he heard the voices again, and soon a foot and then another pounded on the metal of the passage. He heard Crifer's voice louder than the rest: "There is Rikud on the floor!"

Tugging at the handle of the door, Rikud pulled himself upright. Something small and brown scurried across the other side of the viewport and Rikud imagined it turned to look at him with two hideous red eyes.

Rikud screamed and hurtled back through the corridor, and his face was so terrible in the light streaming in through the viewport that everyone fled before him. He stumbled again in the place of the machinery, and down on his hands and knees he fondled the bits of metal which he could see in the dim light through the open door.

"Where's the buzzer?" he sobbed. "I must find the buzzer."

Crifer's voice, from the darkness inside, said, "You broke it. You broke it. And now we will break you—"

Rikud got up and ran. He reached the door again and then he slipped down against it, exhausted. Behind him, the voices and the footsteps came, and soon he saw Crifer's head peer in through the passageway. Then there were others, and then they were walking toward him.

His head whirled and the viewport seemed to swim in a haze.

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Could it be variable, as Crifer had suggested? He wondered if the scurrying brown thing waited somewhere, and nausea struck at the pit of his stomach. But if the plants could live out there and the scurrying thing could live and that was why the world had moved through the blackness, then so could he live out there, and Crifer and all the others . . .

So tightly did he grip the handle that his fingers began to hurt. And his heart pounded hard and he felt the pulses leaping on either side of his neck.

He stared out into the garden, and off into the distance, where the blue-white globe which might have been a star stood just above the row of mounds.

CRIFER was tugging at him, trying to pull him away from the door, and someone was grabbing at his legs, trying to make him fall. He kicked out and the hands let go, and then he turned the handle and shoved the weight of his body with all his strength against the door.

It opened and he stepped outside into the warmth.

The air was fresh, fresher than any air Rikud had ever breathed. He walked around aimlessly, touching the plants and bending down to feel the floor, and sometimes he looked at the blue-white globe on the horizon. It was all very beautiful.

Near the ship, water that did not come from a machine gurgled across the land, and Rikud lay down and drank. It was cool and good, and when he got up, Crifer and Wilm were outside the world, and some of the others followed. They stood around for a long time before going to the water to drink.

Rikud sat down and tore off a piece of a plant, munching on it. It was good.

Crifer picked his head up from the water, his chin wet. "Even feelings are variable. I don't hate you now, Rikud."

Rikud smiled, staring at the ship. "People are variable, too, Crifer. That is, if those creatures coming from the ship are people."

"They're women," said Crifer.

They were strangely shaped in some ways, and yet in others completely human, and their voices were high, like singing. Rikud found them oddly exciting. He liked them. He liked the garden, for all its hugeness. With so many people, and especially now with women, he was not afraid.

It was much better than the small world of machinery, buzzer, frightening doors and women by appointment only.

Rikud felt at home.

—MILTON LESSER

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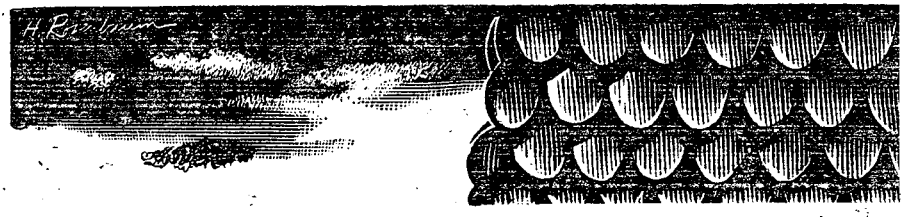
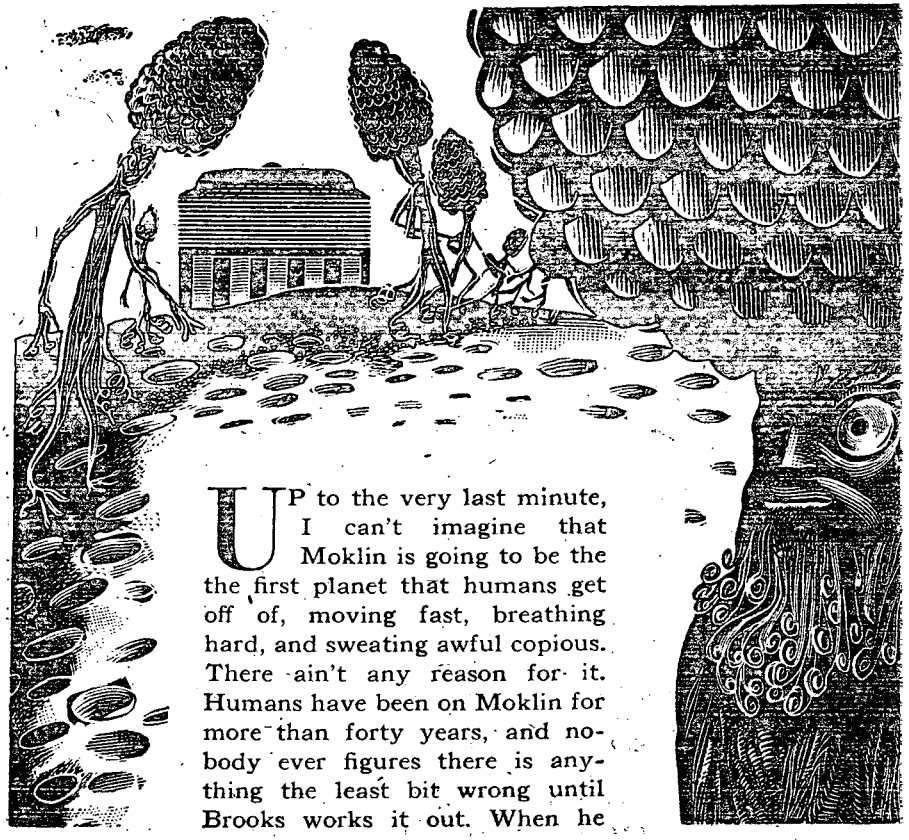


—if you was a



UP to the very last minute, I can't imagine that Moklin is going to be the the first planet that humans get off of, moving fast, breathing hard, and sweating awful copious. There ain't any reason for it. Humans have been on Moklin for more than forty years, and nobody ever figures there is anything the least bit wrong until Brooks works it out. When he

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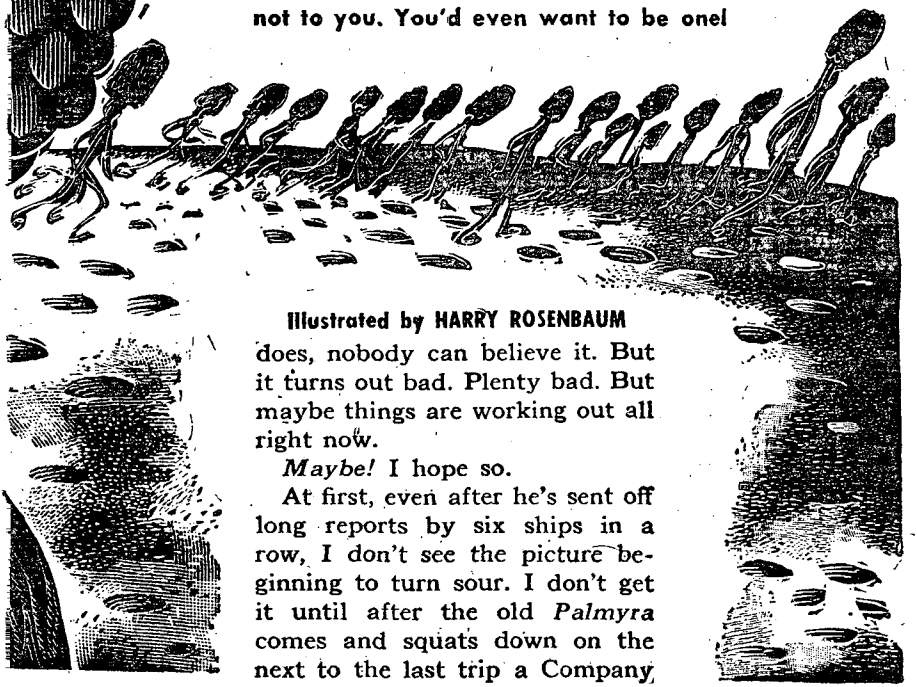
MOKLIN

By MURRAY LEINSTER

You'd love Earthmen to pieces, for they may look pretty bad to themselves, but not to you. You'd even want to be one!



Illustrated by HARRY ROSENBAUM

does, nobody can believe it. But it turns out bad. Plenty bad. But maybe things are working out all right now.

Maybe! I hope so.

At first, even after he's sent off long reports by six ships in a row, I don't see the picture beginning to turn sour. I don't get it until after the old *Palmyra* comes and squats down on the next to the last trip a Company

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ship is ever going to make to Moklin.

Up to that very morning everything is serene, and that morning I am sitting on the trading post porch, not doing a thing but sitting there and breathing happy. I'm looking at a Moklin kid. She's about the size of a human six-year-old and she is playing in a mud puddle while her folks are trading in the post. She is a cute kid—mighty human-looking. She has long whiskers like Old Man Bland, who's the first human to open a trading post and learn to talk to Moklins.

Moklins think a lot of Old Man Bland. They build him a big tomb, Moklin-style, when he dies, and there is more Moklin kids born with long whiskers than you can shake a stick at. And everything looks okay. *Everything!*

Sitting there on the porch, I hear a Moklin talking inside the trade room. Talking English just as good as anybody. He says to Deeth, our Moklin trade-clerk, "But Deeth, I can buy this cheaper over at the other trading post! Why should I pay more here?"

Deeth says, in English too, "I can't help that. That's the price here. You pay it or you don't. That's all."

I just sit there breathing complacent, thinking how good things are. Here I'm Joe Brinkley, and me and Brooks are the Company on Moklin—only humans rate as Company employees and get pensions, of course—and I'm thinking sentimental about how much humaner Moklins are getting every day and how swell everything is.

The six-year-old kid gets up out of the mud puddle, and wrings out her whiskers—they are exactly like the ones on the picture of Old Man Bland in the trade room—and she goes trotting off down the road after her folks. She is mighty human-looking, that one.

The wild ones don't look near so human. Those that live in the forest are greenish, and have saucer eyes, and their noses can wiggle like an Earth rabbit. You wouldn't think they're the same breed as the trading post Moklins at all, but they are. They crossbreed with each other, only the kids look humaner than their parents and are mighty near the same skin color as Earthmen, which is plenty natural when you think about it, but nobody does. Not up to then.

I don't think about that then, or anything else. Not even about the reports Brooks keeps sweating over and sending off with every Company ship. I am just sitting there contented when I notice that Sally, the tree that

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shades the trading post porch, starts pulling up her roots. She gets them coiled careful and starts marching off. I see the other trees are moving off, too, clearing the landing field. They're waddling away to leave a free space, and they're pushing and shoving, trying to crowd each other, and the little ones sneak under the big ones and they all act peevish. Somehow they know a ship is coming in. That's what their walking off means, anyhow. But there ain't a ship due in for a month, yet.

They're clearing the landing field, though, so I start listening for a ship's drive, even if I don't believe it. At first I don't hear a thing. It must be ten minutes before I hear a thin whistle, and right after it the heavy drone that's the ground-repulsor units pushing against bedrock underground. Lucky they don't push on wet stuff, or a ship would sure mess up the local countryside!

I get off my chair and go out to look. Sure enough, the old *Palmyra* comes bulging down out of the sky, a month ahead of schedule, and the trees over at the edge of the field shove each other all round to make room. The ship drops, hangs anxious ten feet up, and then kind of sighs and lets down. Then there's Moklins running out of everywhere, waving cordial.

They sure do like humans, these Moklins! Humans are their idea of what people should be like! Moklins will wrestle the freight over to the trading post while others are climbing over everything that's waiting to go off, all set to pass it up to the ship and hoping to spot friends they've made in the crew. If they can get a human to go home with them and visit while the ship is down, they brag about it for weeks. And do they treat their guests swell!

They got fancy Moklin clothes for them to wear — soft, silky guest garments — and they got Moklin fruits and Moklin drinks —you ought to taste them! And when the humans have to go back to the ship at takeoff time, the Moklins bring them back with flower wreaths all over them.

Humans is tops on Moklin. And Moklins get humaner every day. There's Deeth, our clerk. You couldn't hardly tell him from human, anyways. He looks like a human named Casey that used to be at the trading post, and he's got a flock of brothers and sisters as human-looking as he is. You'd swear—

But this is the last time but one that a Earth ship is going to land on Moklin, though nobody knows it yet. Her passenger port opens up and Captain Haney gets out. The Moklins yell cheer-

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ful when they see him. He waves a hand and helps a human girl out. She has red hair and a sort of businesslike air about her. The Moklins wave and holler and grin. The girl looks at them funny, and Cap Haney explains something, but she sets her lips. Then the Moklins run out a freight-truck, and Haney and the girl get on it, and they come racing over to the post, the Moklins pushing and pulling them and making a big fuss of laughing and hollering—all so friendly, it would make anybody feel good inside. Moklins like humans! They admire them tremendous! They do everything they can think of to be human, and they're smart, but sometimes I get cold shivers when I think how close a thing it turns out to be.

Cap Haney steps off the freight-truck and helps the girl down. Her eyes are blazing. She is the maddest-looking female I ever see, but pretty as they make them, with that red hair and those blue eyes staring at me hostile.

"Hiya, Joe," says Cap Haney. "Where's Brooks?"

I tell him. Brooks is poking around in the mountains up back of the post. He is jumpy and worried and peevish, and he acts like he's trying to find something that ain't there, but he's bound he's going to find it regardless.

"Too bad he's not here," says Haney. He turns to the girl. "This is Joe Brinkley," he says. "He's Brooks' assistant. And, Joe, this is Inspector Caldwell — Miss Caldwell."

"Inspector will do," says the girl, curt. She looks at me accusing. "I'm here to check into this matter of a competitive trading post on Moklin."

"Oh," I says. "That's bad business. But it ain't cut into our trade much. In fact, I don't think it's cut our trade at all."

"Get my baggage ashore, Captain," says Inspector Caldwell, imperious. "Then you can go about your business. I'll stay here until you stop on your return trip."

I call, "Hey, Deeth!" But he's right behind me. He looks respectful and admiring at the girl. You'd swear he's human! He's the spit and image of Casey, who used to be on Moklin until six years back.

"Yes, sir," says Deeth. He says to the girl, "Yes, ma'am. I'll show you your quarters, ma'am, and your baggage will get there right away. This way, ma'am."

He leads her off, but he don't have to send for her baggage. A pack of Moklins come along, dragging it, hopeful of having her say "Thank you" to them for it. There hasn't ever been a human woman on Moklin before, and

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they are all excited. I bet if there had been women around before, there'd have been hell loose before, too. But now the Moklins just hang around, admiring.

There are kids with whiskers like Old Man Bland, and other kids with mustaches—male and female both—and all that sort of stuff. I'm pointing out to Cap Haney some kids that bear a remarkable resemblance to him and he's saying, "Well, what do you know!" when Inspector Caldwell comes back.

"What are you waiting for, Captain?" she asks, frosty.

"The ship usually grounds a few hours," I explain. "These Moklins are such friendly critters, we figure it makes good will for the trading post for the crew to be friendly with 'em."

"I doubt," says Inspector Caldwell, her voice dripping icicles, "that I shall advise that that custom be continued."

Cap Haney shrugs his shoulders and goes off, so I know Inspector Caldwell is high up in the Company. She ain't old, maybe in her middle twenties, I'd say, but the Caldwell family practically owns the Company, and all the nephews and cousins and so on get put into a special school so they can go to work in the family firm. They get taught pretty good, and most of them really rate the good jobs they get. Anyhow, there's plenty of good jobs. The Company runs twenty or thirty solar systems and it's run pretty tight. Being a Caldwell means you get breaks, but you got to live up to them.

Cap Haney almost has to fight his way through the Moklins who want to give him flowers and fruits and such. Moklins are sure crazy about humans! He gets to the entry port and goes in, and the door closes and the Moklins pull back. Then the *Palmyra* booms. The ground-repulsor unit is on. She heaves up, like she is grunting, and goes bulging up into the air, and the humming gets deeper and deeper, and fainter and fainter — and suddenly there's a keen whistling and she's gone. It's all very normal. Nobody would guess that this is the last time but one a Earth ship will ever lift off Moklin!

Inspector Caldwell taps her foot, icy. "When will you send for Mr. Brooks?" she demands.

"Right away," I says to her. "Deeth—"

"I sent a runner for him, ma'am," says Deeth. "If he was in hearing of the ship's landing, he may be on the way here now."

He bows and goes in the trade room. There are Moklins that came to see the ship land, and now have tramped over to do some trading. Inspector Caldwell jumps.

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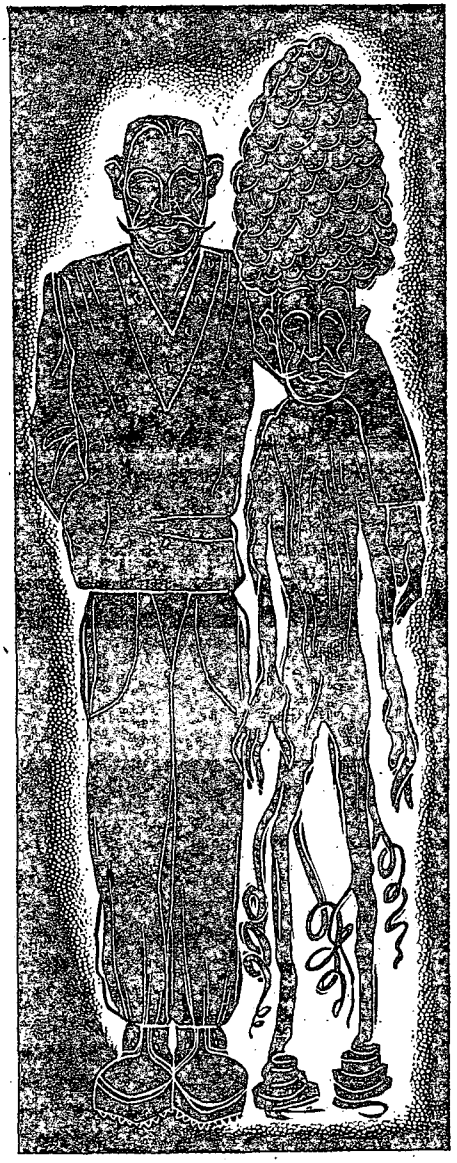
"Wh-what's that?" she asks, tense.

The trees that crowded off the field to make room for the *Palmyra* are waddling back. I realize for the first time that it might look funny to somebody just landed on Moklin. They are regular-looking trees, in a way. They got bark and branches and so on. Only they can put their roots down into holes they make in the ground, and that's the way they stay, mostly. But they can move. Wild ones, when there's a water shortage or they get too crowded or mad with each other, they pull up their roots and go waddling around looking for a better place to take root in.

The trees on our landing field have learned that every so often a ship is going to land and they've got to make room for it. But now the ship is 'gone, and they're lurching back to their places. The younger ones are waddling faster than the big ones, though, and taking the best places, and the old grunting trees are waving their branches indignant and puffing after them mad as hell.

I explain what is happening. Inspector Caldwell just stares. Then Sally comes lumbering up. I got a friendly feeling for Sally. She's pretty old—her trunk is all of three feet thick—but she always puts out a branch to shade my window in the morning, and



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I never let any other tree take her place. She comes groaning up, and uncoils her roots, and sticks them down one by one into the holes she'd left, and sort of scrunches into place and looks peaceful.

"Aren't they — dangerous?" asks Inspector Caldwell, pretty uneasy.

"Not a bit," I says. "Things can change on Moklin. They don't have to fight. Things fight in other places because they can't change and they get crowded, and that's the only way they can meet competition. But there's a special kind of evolution on Moklin. Cooperative, you might call it. It's a nice place to live. Only thing is everything matures so fast. Four years and a Moklin is grown up, for instance."

She sniffs. "What about that other trading post?" she says, sharp. "Who's back of it? The Company is supposed to have exclusive trading rights here. Who's trespassing?"

"Brooks is trying to find out," I says. "They got a good complete line of trade goods, but the Moklins always say the humans running the place have gone off somewhere, hunting and such. We ain't seen any of them."

"No?" says the girl, short. *"I'll* see them! We can't have competition in our exclusive territory! The rest of Mr. Brooks' reports — " She stops. Then she says, "That clerk of yours reminds me of someone I know."

"He's a Moklin," I explain, "but he looks like a Company man named Casey. Casey's Area Director over on Khatim Two now, but he used to be here, and Deeth is the spit and image of him."

"Outrageous!" says Inspector Caldwell, looking disgusted.

There's a couple of trees pushing hard at each other. They are fighting, tree-fashion, for a specially good place. And there's others waddling around, mad as hell, because somebody else beat them to the spots they liked. I watch them. Then I grin, because a couple of young trees duck under the fighting big ones and set their roots down in the place the big trees was fighting over.

"I don't like your attitude!" says Inspector Caldwell, furious.

She goes stamping into the post, leaving me puzzled. What's wrong with me smiling at those kid trees getting the best of their betters?

THAT afternoon Brooks comes back, marching ahead of a pack of woods-Moklins with greenish skins and saucer eyes that've been guiding him around. He's a good-looking kind of fellow, Brooks is, with a good build and a solid jaw.

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When he comes out of the woods on the landing field—the trees are all settled down by then—he's striding impatient and loose-jointed. With the woods-Moklins trailing him, he looks plenty dramatic, like a visi-reel picture of a explorer on some unknown planet, coming back from the dark and perilous forests, followed by the strange natives who do not yet know whether this visitor from outer space is a god or what. You know the stuff.

I see Inspector Caldwell take a good look at him, and I see her eyes widen. She looks like he is a shock, and not a painful one.

He blinks when he sees her. He grunts, "What's this? A she-Moklin?"

Inspector Caldwell draws herself up to her full five-foot-three. She bristles.

I say quick, "This here is Inspector Caldwell that the *Palmyra* dumped off here today. Uh—Inspector, this is Brooks, the Head Trader."

They shake hands. He looks at her and says, "I'd lost hope my reports would ever get any attention paid to them. You've come to check my report that the trading post on Moklin has to be abandoned?"

"I have not!" says Inspector Caldwell, sharp. "That's absurd! This planet has great potentialities, this post is profitable and the natives are friendly, and the trade should continue to increase. The Board is even considering the introduction of special crops."

That strikes me as a bright idea. I'd like to see what would happen if Moklins started cultivating new kinds of plants! It would be a thing to watch—with regular Moklin plants seeing strangers getting good growing places and special attention! I can't even guess what'll happen, but I want to watch!

"What I want to ask right off," says Inspector Caldwell, fierce, "is why you have allowed a competitive trading post to be established, why you did not report it sooner, and why you haven't identified the company back of it?"

Brooks stares at her. He gets mad.

"Hell!" he says. "My reports cover all that! Haven't you read them?"

"Of course not," says Inspector Caldwell. "I was given an outline of the situation here and told to investigate and correct it."

"Oh!" says Brooks. "That's it!"

Then he looks like he's swallowing naughty words. It is funny to see them glare at each other, both of them looking like they are seeing something that interests them plenty, but throwing off angry sparks just the same.

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"If you'll show me samples of their trade goods," says Inspector Caldwell, arrogant, "and I hope you can do *that* much, I'll identify the trading company handling them!"

He grins at her without amusement and leads the way to the inside of the trading post. We bring out the stuff we've had some of our Moklins go over and buy for us. Brooks dumps the goods on a table and stands back to see what she'll make of them, grinning with the same lack of mirth. She picks up a visi-reel projector.

"Hmm," she says, scornful. "Not very good quality. It's . . ." Then she stops. She picks up a forest knife. "This," she says, "is a product of—" Then she stops again. She picks up some cloth and fingers it. She really steams. "I see!" she says, angry. "Because we have been on this planet so long and the Moklins are used to our goods, the people of the other trading post *duplicate* them! Do they cut prices?"

"Fifty per cent," says Brooks.

I chime in, "But we ain't lost much trade. Lots of Moklins still trade with us, out of friendship. Friendly folks, these Moklins."

Just then Deeth comes in, looking just like Casey that used to be here on Moklin. He grins at me.

"A girl just brought you a compliment," he lets me know.

"Shucks!" I says, embarrassed and pleased. "Send her in and get a present for her."

Deeth goes out. Inspector Caldwell hasn't noticed. She's seething over that other trading company copying our trade goods and underselling us on a planet we're supposed to have exclusive. Brooks looks at her grim.

"I shall look over their post," she announces, fierce, "and if they want a trade war, they'll get one! We can cut prices if we need to —we have all the resources of the Company behind us!"

Brooks seems to be steaming on his own, maybe because she hasn't read his reports. But just then a Moklin girl comes in. Not bad-looking, either. You can see she is a Moklin—she ain't as convincing human as Deeth is, say—but she looks pretty human, at that. She giggles at me.

"Compliment," she says, and shows me what she's carrying.

I look. It's a Moklin kid, a boy, just about brand-new. And it has my shape ears, and its nose looks like somebody had stepped on it—my nose is that way—and it looks like a very small-sized working model of me. I chuck it under the chin and say, "Kitchy-coo!" It gurgles at me.

"What's your name?" I ask the girl.

She tells me. I don't remember

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it, and I don't remember ever seeing her before, but she's paid me a compliment, all right—Moklin-style.

"Mighty nice," I say. "Cute as all get-out. I hope he grows up to have more sense than I got, though." Then Deeth comes in with a armload of trade stuff like Old Man Bland gave to the first Moklin kid that was born with long whiskers like his, and I say, "Thanks for the compliment. I am greatly honored."

She takes the stuff and giggles again, and goes out. The kid beams at me over her shoulder and waves its fist. Mighty humanlike. A right cute kid, any way you look at it.

Then I hear a noise. Inspector Caldwell is regarding me with loathing in her eyes.

"Did you say they were friendly creatures?" she asks, bitter. "I think affectionate would be a better word!" Her voice shakes. "You are going to be transferred out of here the instant the *Palmyra* gets back!"

"What's the matter?" I ask, surprised. "She paid me a compliment and I gave her a present. It's a custom. She's satisfied. I never see her before that I remember."

"You *don't?*" she says. "The—the *callousness!* You're revolting!"

Brooks begins to sputter, then he snickers, and all of a sudden he's howling with laughter. He is laughing at Inspector Caldwell. Then I get it, and I snort. Then I hoot and holler. It gets funnier when she gets madder still. She near blows up from being mad!

We must look crazy, the two of us there in the post, just hollering with laughter while she gets furiouser and furiouser. Finally I have to lay down on the floor to laugh more comfortable. You see, she doesn't get a bit of what I've told her about there being a special kind of evolution on Moklin. The more disgusted and furious she looks at me, the harder I have to laugh. I can't help it

WHEN we set out for the other trading post next day, the atmosphere ain't what you'd call exactly cordial. There is just the Inspector and me, with Deeth and a couple of other Moklins for the look of things. She has on a green forest suit, and with her red hair she sure looks good! But she looks at me cold when Brooks says I'll take her over to the other post, and she doesn't say a word the first mile or two.

We trudge on, and presently Deeth and the others get ahead so they can't hear what she says. And she remarks indignant, "I must say Mr. Brooks isn't very cooperative. Why didn't he come

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with me? Is he afraid of the men at the other post?"

"Not him," I says. "He's a good guy. But you got authority over him and you ain't read his reports."

"If I have authority," she says, sharp, "I assure you it's because I'm competent!"

"I don't doubt it," I says. "If you wasn't cute, he wouldn't care. But a man don't want a good-looking girl giving him orders. He wants to give them to her. A homely woman, it don't matter."

SHE tosses her head, but it don't displease her. Then she says, "What's in the reports that I should have read?"

"I don't know," I admit. "But he's been sweating over them. It makes him mad that nobody bothered to read 'em."

"Maybe," she guesses, "it was what I need to know about this other trading post. What do you know about it, Mr. Brinkley?"

I tell her what Deeth has told Brooks. Brooks found out about it because one day some Moklins come in to trade and ask friendly why we charge so much for this and that. Deeth told them we'd always charged that, and they say the other trading post sells things cheaper, and Deeth says what trading post? So they up and tell him there's another post that sells the same kind of things we do, only cheaper. But that's all they'll say.

So Brooks tells Deeth to find out, and he scouts around and comes back. There is another trading post only fifteen miles away, and it is selling stuff just like ours. And it charges only half price. Deeth didn't see the men—just the Moklin clerks. We ain't been able to see the men either.

"Why haven't you seen the men?"

"Every time Brooks or me go over," I explain, "the Moklins they got working for them say the other men are off somewhere. Maybe the're starting some more posts. We wrote 'em a note, asking what the hell they mean, but they never answered it. Of course, we ain't seen their books or their living quarters—"

"You could find out plenty by a glimpse at their books!" she snaps. "Why haven't you just marched in and made the Moklins show you what you want to know, since the men were away?"

"Because," I says, patient, "Moklins imitate humans. If we start trouble, they'll start it too. We can't set a example of rough stuff like burglary, mayhem, breaking and entering, manslaughter, or bigamy, or those Moklins will do just like us."

"Bigamy!" She grabs on that sardonic. "If you're trying to

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make me think you've got enough moral sense—"

I get a little mad. Brooks and me, we've explained to her, careful, how it is admiration *and* the way evolution works on Moklin that makes Moklin kids get born with long whiskers and that the compliment the Moklin girl has paid me is just exactly that. But she hasn't listened to a word.

"Miss Caldwell," I says, "Brooks and me told you the facts. We tried to tell them delicate, to spare your feelings. Now if you'll try to spare mine, I'll thank you."

"If you mean your finer feelings," she says, sarcastic, "I'll spare them as soon as I find some!"

So I shut up. There's no use trying to argue with a woman. We tramp on through the forest without a word. Presently we come on a nest-bush. It's a pretty big one. There are a couple dozen nests on it, from the little-bitty bud ones no bigger than your fist, to the big ripe ones lined with soft stuff that have busted open and have got cacklebirds housekeeping in them now.

There are two cacklebirds sitting on a branch by the nest that is big enough to open up and have eggs laid in it, only it ain't. The cacklebirds are making noises like they are cussing it and telling it to hurry up and open, because they are in a hurry.

"That's a nest-bush," I says. "It grows nests for the cacklebirds. The birds — uh — fertilize the ground around it. They're sloppy feeders and drop a lot of stuff that rots and is fertilizer too. The nest-bush and the cacklebirds kind of cooperate. That's the way evolution works on Moklin, like Brooks and me told you."

She tosses that red head of hers and stamps on, not saying a word. So we get to the other trading post. And there she gets one of these slow-burning, long-lasting mads on that fill a guy like me with awe.

There's only Moklins at the other trading post, as usual. They say the humans are off somewhere. They look at her admiring and polite. They show her their stock. It is practically identical with ours—only they admit that they've sold out of some items because their prices are low. They act most respectful and pleased to see her.

But she don't learn a thing about where their stuff comes from or what company is horning in on Moklin trade. And she looks at their head clerk and she burns and burns.

WHEN we get back, Brooks is sweating over memorandums he has made, getting another report ready for the next

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Company ship. Inspector Caldwell marches into the trade room and gives orders in a controlled, venomous voice. Then she marches right in on Brooks.

"I have just ordered the Moklin sales force to cut the price on all items on sale by seventy-five per cent," she says, her voice trembling a little with fury. "I have also ordered the credit given for Moklin trade goods to be doubled. They want a trade war? They'll get it!"

SHE is a lot madder than business would account for. Brooks says, tired, "I'd like to show you some facts. I've been over every inch of territory in thirty miles, looking for a place where a ship could land for that other post. There isn't any. Does that mean anything to you?"

"The post is there, isn't it?" she says. "And they have trade goods, haven't they? And we have exclusive trading rights on Moklin, haven't we? That's enough for me. Our job is to drive them out of business!"

But she is a lot madder than business would account for. Brooks says, very weary, "There's nearly a whole planet where they could have put another trading post. They could have set up shop on the other hemisphere and charged any price they pleased. But they set up shop right next to us! Does *that* make sense?"

"Setting up close," she says, "would furnish them with customers already used to human trade goods. And it furnished them with Moklins trained to be interpreters and clerks! And—" Then it come out, what she's raging, boiling, steaming, burning up about. "And," she says, furious, "it furnished them with a Moklin head-clerk who is a very handsome young man, Mr. Brooks! He not only resembles you in every feature, but he even has a good many of your mannerisms. You should be very proud!"

With this she slams out of the room. Brooks blinks.

"She won't believe anything," he says, sour, "except only that man is vile. Is that true about a Moklin who looks like me?"

I nod.

"Funny his folks never showed him to me for a compliment-present!" Then he stares at me, hard. "How good is the likeness?"

"If he is wearing your clothes," I tell him, truthful, "I'd swear he is you."

Then Brooks—slow, very slow—turns white. "Remember the time you went off with Deeth and his folks, hunting? That was the time a Moklin got killed. You were wearing guest garments, weren't you?"

I feel queer inside, but I nod.

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Guest garments, for Moklins, are like the best bedroom and the drumstick of the chicken among humans. And a Moklin hunting party is something. They go hunting *garlikthos*, which you might as well call dragons, because they've got scales and they fly and they are tough babies.

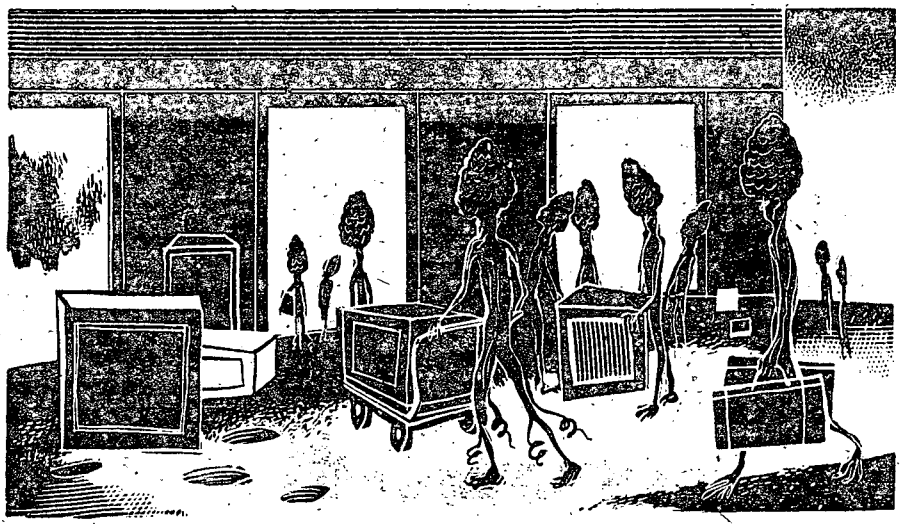
The way to hunt them is you take along some cacklebirds that ain't nesting—they are no good for anything while they're honeymooning—and the cacklebirds go flapping around until a *garlikthos* comes after them, and then they go jet-streaking to where the hunters are, cackling a blue streak to say, "Here I come, boys! Hold everything until I get past!" Then the *garlikthos* dives after them and the hunters get it as it dives.

You give the cacklebirds its innards, and they sit around and eat, cackling to each other, zestful, like they're bragging about the other times they done the same thing, only better.

"You were wearing guest garments?" repeats Brooks, grim.

I feel very queer inside, but I nod again. Moklin guest garments are mighty easy on the skin and feel mighty good. They ain't exactly practical hunting clothes, but the Moklins feel bad if a human that's their guest don't wear them. And of course he has to shed his human clothes to wear them.

"What's the idea?" I want to



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know. But I feel pretty unhappy inside.

"You didn't come back for one day, in the middle of the hunt, after tobacco and a bath?"

"No," I says, beginning to get rattled. "We were way over at the Thunlib Hills. We buried the dead Moklin over there and had a hell of a time building a tomb over him. Why?"

"During that week," says Brooks, grim, "and while you were off wearing Moklin guest garments, somebody came back wearing your clothes — and got some tobacco and passed the time of day and went off again. Joe, just like there's a Moklin you say could pass for me, there's one that could pass for you. In fact, he did. Nobody suspected either."

I get panicky. "But what'd he do that for?" I want to know. "He didn't steal anything! Would he have done it just to brag to the other Moklins that he fooled you?"

"He might," says Brooks, "have been checking to see if he could fool me. Or Captain Haney of the *Palmyra*. Or—"

He looks at me. I feel myself going numb. This can mean one hell of a mess!

"I haven't told you before," says Brooks, "but I've been guessing at something like this. Moklins like to be human, and they get human kids—kids that look human, anyway. Maybe they can want to be smart like

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humans, and they are." He tries to grin, and can't. "That rival trading post looked fishy to me right at the start. They're practicing with that. It shouldn't be there at all, but it is. You see?"

I feel weak and sick all over. This is a dangerous sort of thing! But I say quick, "If you mean they got Moklins that could pass for you and me, and they're figuring to bump us off and take our places—I don't believe that! Moklins *like* humans! They wouldn't harm humans for *anything!*"

Brooks don't pay any attention. He says, harsh, "I've been trying to persuade the Company that we've got to get out of here, fast! And they send this Inspector Caldwell, who's not only female, but a redhead to boot! All they think about is a competitive trading post! And all she sees is that we're a bunch of lascivious scoundrels, and since she's a woman there's nothing that'll convince her otherwise!"

Then something hits me. It looks hopeful.

"She's the first human woman to land on Moklin. And she has got red hair. It's the first red hair the Moklins ever saw. Have we got time?"

He figures. Then he says, "With luck, it ought to turn up! You've hit it!" And then his expression sort of softens. "If that happens—poor kid, she's going to take it hard! Women hate to be wrong. Especially redheads! But that might be the saving of—of humanity, when you think of it."

I blink at him. He goes on, fierce, "Look, *I'm* no Moklin! You know that. But if there's a Moklin that looks enough like me to take my place . . . You see? We got to think of Inspector Caldwell, anyhow. If you ever see me cross my fingers, you wiggle your little finger. Then I know it's you. And the other way about. Get it? You swear you'll watch over Inspector Caldwell?"

"Sure!" I say. "Of course!"

I wiggle my little finger. He crosses his. It's a signal nobody but us two would know. I feel a lot better.

BROOKS goes off next morning, grim, to visit the other trading post and see the Moklin that looks so much like him. Inspector Caldwell goes along, fierce, and I'm guessing it's to see the fireworks when Brooks sees his Moklin double that she thinks is more than a coincidence. Which she is right, only not in the way she thinks.

Before they go, Brooks crosses his fingers and looks at me significant. I wiggle my little finger back at him. They go off.

I sit down in the shade of Sally and try to think things out. I

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am all churned up inside, and scared as hell. It's near two weeks to landing time, when the old *Palmyra* ought to come bulging down out of the sky with a load of new trade goods. I think wistful about how swell everything has been on Moklin up to now, and how Moklins admire humans, and how friendly everything has been, and how it's a great compliment for Moklins to want to be like humans, and to get like them, and how no Moklin would ever dream of hurting a human and how they imitate humans joyous and reverent and happy. Nice people, Moklins. But—

The end of things is in sight. Liking humans has made Moklins smart, but now there's been a slip-up. Moklins will do anything to produce kids that look like humans. That's a compliment. But no human ever sees a Moklin that's four or five years old and all grown up and looks so much like him that nobody can tell them apart. That ain't scheming. It's just that Moklins like humans, but they're scared the humans might not like to see themselves in a sort of Moklin mirror. So if they did that at all, they'd maybe keep it a secret, like children keep secrets from grownups.

Moklins are a lot like kids: You can't help liking them. But a human can get plenty panicky if he thinks what would happen if Moklins get to passing for humans among humans, and want their kids to have top-grade brains, and top-grade talents, and so on . . .

I sweat, sitting there. I can see the whole picture. Brooks is worrying about Moklins loose among humans, outsmarting them as their kids grow up, being the big politicians, the bosses, the planetary pioneers, the prettiest girls and the handsomest guys in the Galaxy — everything humans want to be themselves. Just thinking about it is enough to make any human feel like he's going nuts. But Brooks is also worrying about Inspector Caldwell, who is five foot three and red-headed and cute as a bug's ear and riding for a bad fall.

They come back from the trip to the other trading post. Inspector Caldwell is baffled and mad. Brooks is sweating and scared. He slips me the signal and I wiggle my little finger back at him, just so I'll know he didn't get substituted for without Inspector Caldwell knowing it, and so he knows nothing happened to me while he was gone. They didn't see the Moklin that looks like Brooks. They didn't get a bit of information we didn't have before—which is just about none at all.

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Things go on. Brooks and me are sweating it out until the *Palmyra* lets down out of the sky again, meanwhile praying for Inspector Caldwell to get her ears pinned back so proper steps can be taken, and every morning he crosses his fingers at me, and I wiggle my little finger back at him . . . And he watches over Inspector Caldwell tender.

THE other trading post goes on placid. They sell their stuff at half the price we sell ours for. So, on Inspector Caldwell's orders, we cut ours again to half what they sell theirs for. So they sell theirs for half what we sell ours for, so we sell ours for half what they sell theirs for. And so on. Meanwhile we sweat.

Three days before the *Palmyra* is due, our goods are marked at just exactly one per cent of what they was marked a month before, and the other trading post is selling them at half that. It looks like we are going to have to pay a bonus to Moklins to take goods away for us to compete with the other trading post.

Otherwise, everything looks normal on the surface. Moklins hang around as usual, friendly and admiring. They'll hang around a couple days just to get a look at Inspector Caldwell, and they regard her respectful.

Brooks looks grim. He is head over heels crazy about her now, and she knows it, and she rides him hard. She snaps at him, and he answers her patient and gentle —because he knows that when what he hopes is going to happen, she is going to need him to comfort her. She has about wiped out our stock, throwing bargain sales. Our shelves are almost bare. But the other trading post still has plenty of stock.

"Mr. Brooks," says Inspector Caldwell, bitter, at breakfast, "we'll have to take most of the *Palmyra*'s cargo to fill up our inventory."

"Maybe," he says, tender, "and maybe not."

"But we've got to drive that other post out of business!" she says, desperate. Then she breaks down. "This—this is my first independent assignment. I've got to handle it successfully!"

He hesitates. But just then Deeth comes in. He beams friendly at Inspector Caldwell.

"A compliment for you, ma'am. Three of them."

She goggles at him. Brooks says, gentle, "It's all right. Deeth, show them in and get some presents."

Inspector Caldwell splutters incredulous, "But—but—"

"Don't be angry," says Brooks. "They mean it as a compliment It is, actually, you know."

Three Moklin girls come in,

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giggling. They are not bad-looking at all. They look as human as Deeth, but one of them has a long, droopy mustache like a mate of the *Palmyra*—that's because they hadn't ever seen a human woman before Inspector Caldwell come along. They sure have admired her, though! And Moklin kids get born fast. Very fast.

They show her what they are holding so proud and happy in their arms. They have got three little Moklin kids, one apiece. And every one of them has red hair, just like Inspector Caldwell, and every one of them is a girl that is the spit and image of her. You would swear they are human babies, and you'd swear they are hers. But of course they ain't. They make kid noises and wave their little fists.

Inspector Caldwell is just plain paralyzed. She stares at them, and goes red as fire and white as chalk, and she is speechless. So Brooks has to do the honors. He admires the kids extravagant, and the Moklin girls giggle, and take the compliment presents Deeth brings in, and they go out happy.

When the door closes, Inspector Caldwell wilts.

"Oh-h!" she wails. "It's true! You didn't—you haven't—they can make their babies look like anybody they want!"

Brooks puts his arms around her and she begins to cry against his shoulder. He pats her and says, "They've got a queer sort of evolution on Moklin, darling. Babies here inherit desired characteristics. Not *acquired* characteristics, but *desired* ones! And what could be more desirable than you?"

I am blinking at them. He says to me, cold, "Will you kindly get the hell out of here and stay out?"

I come to. I says, "Just one precaution."

I wiggle my little finger. He crosses his fingers at me.

"Then," I says, "since there's no chance of a mistake, I'll leave you two together."

And I do.

THE *Palmyra* booms down out of the sky two days later. We are all packed up. Inspector Caldwell is shaky, on the porch of the post, when Moklins come hollering and waving friendly over from the landing field pulling a freight-truck with Cap Haney on it. I see other festive groups around members of the crew that—this being a scheduled stop—have been given ship-leave for a couple hours to visit their Moklin friends.

"I've got the usual cargo—" begins Cap Haney.

"Don't discharge it," says Inspector Caldwell, firm. "We are

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abandoning this post. I have authority and Mr. Brooks has convinced me of the necessity for it. Please get our baggage to the ship."

He gapes at her. "The Company don't like to give in to competition—"

"There isn't any competition," says Inspector Caldwell. She gulps. "Darling, you tell him," she says to Brooks.

He says, lucid, "She's right, Captain. The other trading post is purely a Moklin enterprise. They like to do everything that humans do. Since humans were running a trading post, they opened one too. They bought goods from us and pretended to sell them at half price, and we cut our prices, and they bought more goods from us and pretended to sell at half the new prices. . . . Some Moklin or other must've thought it would be nice to be a smart businessman, so his kids would be smart businessmen. Too smart! We close up this post before Moklins think of other things . . ."

He means, of course, that if Moklins get loose from their home planet and pass as humans, their kids can maybe take over human civilization. Human nature couldn't take that! But it is something to be passed on to the high brass, and not told around general.

"Better sound the emergency recall signal," says Inspector Caldwell, brisk.

We go over to the ship and the *Palmyra* lets go that wailing siren that'll carry twenty miles. Any crew member in hearing is going to beat it back to the ship full-speed. They come running from every which way, where they been visiting their Moklin friends. And then, all of a sudden, here comes a fellow wearing Moklin guest garments, yelling, "Hey! Wait! I ain't got my clothes—"

And then there is what you might call a dead silence. Because lined up for checkoff is another guy that comes running at the recall signal, and he is wearing ship's clothes, and you can see that him and the guy in Moklin guest garments are just exactly alike. Twins. Identical. The spit and image of each other. And it is for sure that one of them is a Moklin. But which?

Cap Haney's eyes start to pop out of his head. But then the guy in *Palmyra* uniform grins and says, "Okay, I'm a Moklin. But us Moklins like humans so much, I thought it would be nice to make a trip to Earth and see more humans. My parents planned it five years ago, made me look like this wonderful human, and hid me for this moment. But we would not want to make any difficulties for humans, so I have

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confessed and I will leave the ship."

He takes it as a joke on him. He talks English as good as anybody. I don't know how anybody could tell which was the human guy and which one the Moklin, but this Moklin grins and steps down, and the other Moklins admire him enormous for passing even a few minutes as human among humans.

We get away from there so fast, he is allowed to keep the human uniform.

MOKLIN is the first planet that humans ever get off of, moving fast, breathing hard, and sweating copious. It's one of those things that humans just can't take. Not that there's anything wrong with Moklins. They're swell folks. They like humans. But humans just can't take the idea of Moklins passing for human and being all the things humans want to be themselves. I think it's really a false alarm. I'll find out pretty soon.

Inspector Caldwell and Brooks get married, and they go off to a post on Briarius Four—a swell place for a honeymoon if there ever was one—and I guess they are living happy ever after. Me, I go to the new job the Company assigns me—telling me stern not to talk about Moklin, which I don't—and the Space Patrol orders no human ship to land on Moklin for any reason.

But I've been saving money and worrying. I keep thinking of those three Moklin kids that Inspector Caldwell knows she ain't the father of. I worry about those kids. I hope nothing's happened to them. Moklin kids grow up fast, like I told you. They'll be just about grown now.

I'll tell you. I've bought me a little private spacecruiser, small but good. I'm shoving off for Moklin next week. If one of those three ain't married, I'm going to marry her, Moklin-style, and bring her out to a human colony planet. We'll have some kids. I know just what I want my kids to be like. They'll have plenty of brains—*top-level brains*—and the girls will be *real* good-looking!

But besides that, I've got to bring some other Moklins out and start them passing for human, too. Because my kids are going to need other Moklins to marry, ain't they? It's not that I don't like humans. I do! If the fellow I look like—Joe Brinkley—hadn't got killed accidental on that hunting trip with Deeth, I never would have thought of taking his place and being Joe Brinkley. But you can't blame me for wanting to live among humans.

Wouldn't you, if you was a Moklin?

—MURRAY LEINSTER

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THE METEORIC STREAM

By WILLY LEY

Like cops, astronomers usually aren't around when big things happen—which may explain reports of Flying Saucers!

THEY fell into the atmosphere like a swarm of angry missiles from the Moon. Just where they hit the atmosphere first is not known, but it must have been somewhere out over the Pacific Ocean. Then they were seen over Saskatchewan, going east. They were, it was established later, some 35 miles above sea level and they moved, as became apparent afterward, with that velocity which mathematicians and physicists call the "circular velocity." At that velocity, the degree of curva-

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ture of a ballistic trajectory is the same as the degree of curvature of the Earth's surface, so that the altitude above sea level does not change. Expressed in figures the circular velocity is a little less than five miles per second.

If it were to happen today, there would be frantic phone calls to newspapers and to police stations about a missile attack, or flying saucers. But the date was the 9th of February, 1913.

It was seen from Saskatchan all the way across the Great Lakes to the Bermuda islands, and by ships out at sea beyond Bermuda. Unfortunately much of western New York State, Pennsylvania and Maryland happened to be covered by an unbroken overcast that evening. If the sky had been clear all along the path of the meteoric procession, it could have been seen by some thirty million people. Because of the overcast, only 141 observations could be put on record. All but six of them came from Canada and mostly from Ontario; one came from Michigan; one from New Jersey; two from Bermuda and two from ships at sea.

TO the regret of all astronomers, not a member of the astronomical fraternity was a witness to the event. And only one of the witnesses used some optical aid: a high school boy in Trenton, N.J. had the good sense to run back into his room to get an opera glass.

The cloud layer and the absence of trained observers handicapped the investigation of the phenomenon a good deal. But by collecting diligently everything that could be learned, Professor C. A. Chant of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada did succeed in putting a rather complete picture together. As seen in western Ontario, this is what happened:

> At about 9:05 on the evening in question, there suddenly appeared in the northwestern sky a fiery red body which quickly grew larger as it came nearer, and which was then seen to be followed by a long tail. Some observers state that the body was single, some that it was composed of two distinct parts, and others that there were three parts, all traveling together and each followed by a long tail.
>
> The front portion of the body appears to have been somewhat brighter than the rest, but the general color was a fiery red or golden yellow. To some the tail seemed like the glare from the open door of a furnace; to others it was like the illumination from a searchlight; to others like the stream of sparks blown away from a burning chimney by strong wind.

Many of the observers said later that they thought at first that somebody had fired a large skyrocket, partly because of the color which reminded them of burning fireworks, partly because of the

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long tail, in which they believed they saw sparks. But a sky-rocket lasts for just so long and then falls, while this fiery red body did not.

Before the astonishment aroused by this first meteor had subsided, other bodies were seen coming from the northwest, emerging from precisely the same place as the first one. Onward they moved, at the same deliberate pace, in twos or threes or fours, with tails streaming behind, though not so long nor so bright as in the first case. They all traversed the same path and were heading for the same point in the southeastern sky. Gradually the bodies became smaller, until the last ones were but red sparks, some of which were snuffed out before they reached their destination. Several report that near the middle of the great procession was a fine large star without a tail, and that a similar body brought up the rear.

To most observers the outstanding features of the phenomenon was the slow majestic motion of the bodies; and almost equally remarkable was the perfect formation which they retained. Many compared them to a fleet of airships, with lights on either side and forward and aft; but airmen will have to practice many years before they will be able to preserve such perfect order . . .

While all witnesses agreed on the general picture, the date, the time and the direction of motion, there was considerable disagreement on the number of bodies. Most witnesses said "fifteen or twenty;" a number went higher, thinking that there must have been "between fifty and a hundred," while a few witnesses maintained that there had been "thousands." This, aside from the simple fact that some people have better eyes than others, depended on how the counting was done.

The very first body, for example, could have been counted as three by some, while most would probably count it as one, even though it seemed to consist of several parts. The most reliable statement is probably that of the pupil of Trenton High School, Cecil Carley, who used an opera glass. He wrote: "There were about ten groups in all and each group, as seen through the opera glass, consisted of from 20 to 40 meteors."

While each observation was not very good—from the professional point of view—all together contained enough pertinent information to calculate a number of figures. Some of them have already been mentioned. Over Canada, the meteorites were 35 miles high and moved with a velocity of about five miles per second. The distance between the various groups in the procession must have varied from a minimum of about 50 miles to a maximum of about 100 miles. The total length of the meteoric procession, therefore, was about 1,000 miles.

For any single observer in Canada, the fantastic display lasted

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between three and four minutes. Whenever natural phenomena are reported by chance witnesses, the things they *don't* say are very often as important as the things they do report.

It is important in this case, for example, that not a single observer reported that a meteorite dropped out of the procession and fell to the ground. Some thought sparks were falling from the tails, and that is probably correct. But the main bodies stayed in place. Nor did any one of the Canadian observers report that the groups of the procession shifted while he was watching. Everyone saw the groups maintain their distance from each other. The sequence of the groups also did not change: a large golden red body (or bodies) first, then a number of smaller ones of similar appearance, a bright tailless body, then again some others, and small red ones last.

But while the procession traversed the cloud-covered eastern United States, a change did take place. The reports from Bermuda leave no doubt, as far as time of appearance and direction of travel were concerned, that the same meteoric procession was seen. But the description of the appearance differs markedly from the Canadian reports.

The large tailless body was now in the lead and was emitting sparks. The others followed after it and were apparently not quite as bright any more.

There is, as we now know from high altitude rocket work, very little air resistance at a height of 35 miles. But over a distance such as the one from Toronto to Bermuda, even this slight air resistance must have made itself felt. The procession, traveling under kinetic energy only, had lost altitude. Professor Pickering calculated, from the Bermuda reports, that the procession was only about 30 miles above sea level when the islands were reached.

As regards the fact that the "fine tailless star," which had been in the middle of the procession when over Canada, was in the lead and sparking over Bermuda, Prof. Pickering arrived at an interesting conclusion. That tailless meteor, he said, was probably an iron meteorite, while all the others were either stony meteorites or so-called stony irons. An iron meteorite, having a higher specific gravity, has, of course, a greater kinetic energy than a body of lesser specific gravity traveling with the same velocity. Because of its higher kinetic energy, it had gradually forged ahead and assumed the lead.

The ships out at sea were not far enough beyond Bermuda for their crews to see a further step

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in the history of the meteoric procession. If there had been a ship a thousand miles or so southeast of Bermuda—say on a line drawn from Bermuda to St. Helena—it might have reported a still lower altitude, and, in all probability, a longer interval between the tailless meteor and the other groups which followed. It was almost certain that the procession fell into the Atlantic Ocean before reaching the African coast.

That night was a night of large meteors. Three bright fireballs and one group were reported a few hours later, going west. A single bright fireball had been seen 45 minutes before the procession began, traveling in the same direction. And after the procession there was one going east.

From all this, Prof. Pickering concluded that during that night our planet had overtaken a swarm of relatively large meteorites, which traveled roughly along the orbit of Earth and with about the same velocity, relative to the Sun. The point is that the swarm extended over an area somewhat bigger than the diameter of Earth. Because of that, some were caught on one side of the planet and some on the other. The result, seen from the ground, was, of course, meteors going in opposite directions.

As is customary after a strange phenomenon, a number of researchers invaded the libraries looking for similar events in the past. There were plenty of bright fireballs going east or going west. There were bright fireballs with long tails and bright fireballs without tails. There were fireballs which had disappeared below the horizon, and there were fireballs which had exploded in full view of the witnesses. Sometimes even pieces had been salvaged. But the researchers had to go back ten centuries to find another actual procession. It was seen in the vicinity of Cairo in 1029 A. D., only nobody had bothered then to write down details. The source merely said that "in the month of *Redjeb* (August) many stars passed, with a great noise and a brilliant light."

That does not mean, naturally, that another thousand years will go by until another meteoric procession occurs. It may happen next year, or next month, or tomorrow. But one almost wishes that there will be an overcast again, with only astronomical observatories sticking out through the cloud layer. Because now, with world tension as high as it is, nine out of ten observers would interpret such a procession as a military attack.

It would be like throwing a rock into a nest of hornets—a cosmic joke on blind-angry humanity.

—WILLY LEY

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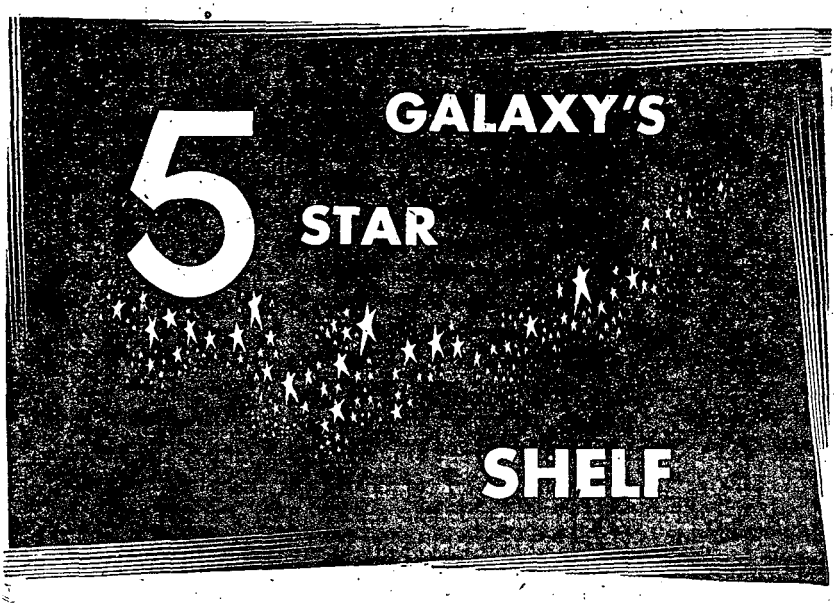

THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER, by A. E. Van Vogt. Greenberg: Publishers New York, 1951. 231 *pages,* $2.75.

CALLIDITY? Callidity! This word describes another one of those many Easy Steps to Supermanhood that A. E. v. V. has delighted in supermanhandling during his writing career. Remember *Null-A? The Toti-Potent Being?* The radioactive Lord Clané? The *Nexialist?* And of course *Slan?* There must be more, but I've forgotten 'em.

The Sooper-Hooper-Dooperman in the present opus has a kind of magic power called by the word which opens this faintly disrespectful review — a word which according to my Unabridged Webster ('tisn't in the Collegiate W. at all) means *cunning,* or *craftiness.*

Herr Professor van Vogt shifts its molecular structure to make it mean "unbeatable luck" or "ability to influence elements of chance in one's favor." A foolproof gambler would be "callid," says v. V. And callid Cayle Clarke, the book's leading (but not only) superman, ends up being a foolproof stock-market rigger and financier.

I suppose it isn't fair to pick on this foible of Van's for impos-

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sibly terrific supermen in starting a review of this wholly absorbing story.

No doubt about it, van Vogt is one of the masters of the Effective Grandiose in modern fiction. Furthermore, the plan of the book is essentially intriguing. It is assumed that any society that wants to remain both stable and yet advancing must have *both* a practically permanent government *and* an equally permanent, *built-in, operating "safety-valve"* opposition.

In the present instance we have Isher, an empire some X,000 years from now, ruled by a fairly unlikely 28-year-old queen. It is an absolute monarchy, more or less.

The weapons shops, on the other hand, with all the super science your little heart could wish for — matter transmitters, invisibility machines, time travel gadgets and what not — exist simply to provide the individual citizen of Isher with an individual defense against encroachments on his individual rights by the state. This it does by providing them, on demand, with individual and invincible "energy weapons" which will shoot only when they are being used in self-defense. Inanimate objects with electronic consciences, eh?

You all remember, I am sure, that fine old unrepeatable tale, the tag line of which, shrilled out in a high piping voice, is: "Hold onto your hats, boys, here we go again!" That's the way I always feel about a van Vogt story. A wonderful rollercoaster thrill.

DRAGON'S ISLAND, by Jack Williamson. Simon & Schuster, New York, 1951. 246 *pages,* $2.50

THIS new Williamson is a long way from the enormous conception that was *The Humanoids,* and its basic idea, the creation of supermen not too different from those in Olaf Stapledon's *Odd John,* is not what you'd call original. It is sometimes powerful and often ingenious, but generally too reminiscent.

Through *genetic engineering,* so-called, mysterious Scientist Charles Kendrew is supposed to have created a number of "Not-Men" or "Homo Perfectans."

The existence of these supermen becomes known to a few homo saps, who organize a small ruthless band dedicated to their destruction. Along comes Hero Dane Belfast, son of one of old Kendrew's close associates and both the homo-sap opponents and the Beautiful Not-girl try to get Belfast on their sides.

After violent to-do, which could satisfactorily been reported in 20,000 fewer words, the matter is resolved, and one is permitted to assume that the super-crea-

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tures will be allowed to breed and ultimately eliminate us poor inferiors.

There is some impressively real atmosphere, particularly in the jungles and hidden laboratories on New Guinea (the "Dragon's Island" of the title), and a goodly number of satisfactory mystifications, curiosities, and superactions, of the sort Jack Williamson is adept at producing.

TWO NOVELS, by L. Ron Hubbard. Gnome Press, Inc., New York, 1951. 256 *pages,* $2.75.

THE two Novels are *Typewriter in the Sky* and *Fear.* Neither of them is science fiction, despite the jacket claim — they are weirds or "fantasies" — and both are promoted on the jacket as being by "L. Ron Hubbard, the Founder of Dianetics," which, come to think of it, is reason for publishing other Hubbard fiction.

Typewriter in the Sky is a silly idea inexpertly carried out. It assumes that a modern man is physically translated to the Sixteen Hundreds to become a Spanish admiral — unwilling villain of a novel a friend is writing.

Outside of a lot of extremely ordinary costume drammer and strictly pulp romance, the tale is devoted to the struggle between "the typewriter in the sky," which makes the modern character in his "displaced personage" do the commercial heroisms the author wants him to do.

Fear, on the other hand, and despite its screwy modus operandi turns out to be a totally unexpected masterpiece of horror.

The hero is a professor who has published an article in which he claims there are no demons. Well, it turns out there are, says Hubbard and they get the hell after Professor Lowry, with, as the ancient saying goes, bells on. From there on in, it is definitely no kidding.

What we have here, it seems to me, is a pyrotechnically brilliant record of the effects of an uncontrollable phobia on a relatively imaginative and perceptive individual.

The whole novella is a shattering kaleidoscope of auditory, visual, tactile and, even worse, mental and emotional horrors, awfulnesses, hysterias, frustrations, stinks and shuddering screams, all of which lead up to a totally unexpected — and yet inevitable — climax, which is all real and a yard wide (nothing supernatural about that ending!) and as horrible as any of the psychological terrors that have preceded it.

A completely engrossing tale. You will be moved and astonished by what Hubbard has achieved in it.

—GROFF CONKLIN

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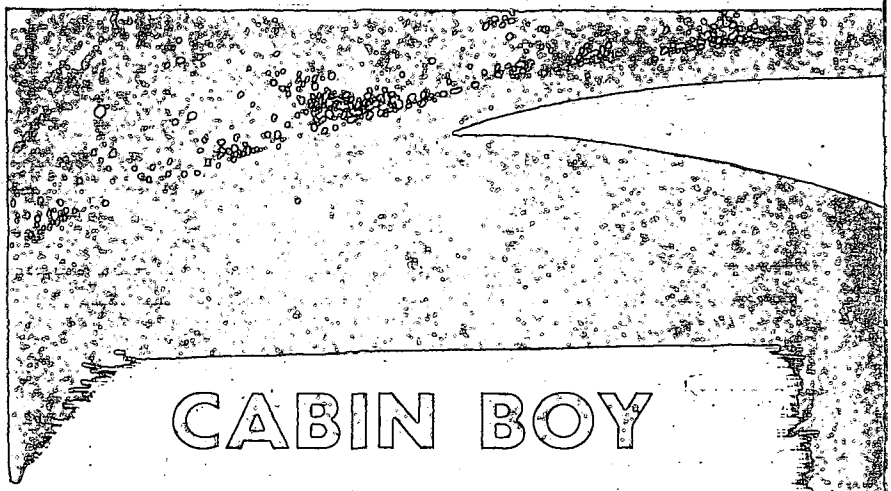

CABIN BOY

By DAMON KNIGHT

If you believe you can write a blurb for this story, go ahead. In all science fiction, it is perhaps the weirdest encounter of alien races!

Illustrated by THORNE

THE cabin boy's name was unspeakable, and even its meaning would be difficult to convey in any human tongue. For convenience, we may as well call him Tommy Loy.

Please bear in mind that all these terms are approximations. Tommy was not exactly a cabin boy, and even the spaceship he served was not exactly a spaceship, nor was the Captain exactly a captain. But if you think of Tommy as a freckled, scowling, red-haired, willful, prank-playing, thoroughly abhorrent brat, and of the Captain as a crusty, ponderous old man, you may be able to understand their relationship.

A word about Tommy will serve to explain why these approximations have to be made, and just how much they mean. Tommy, to a human being, would

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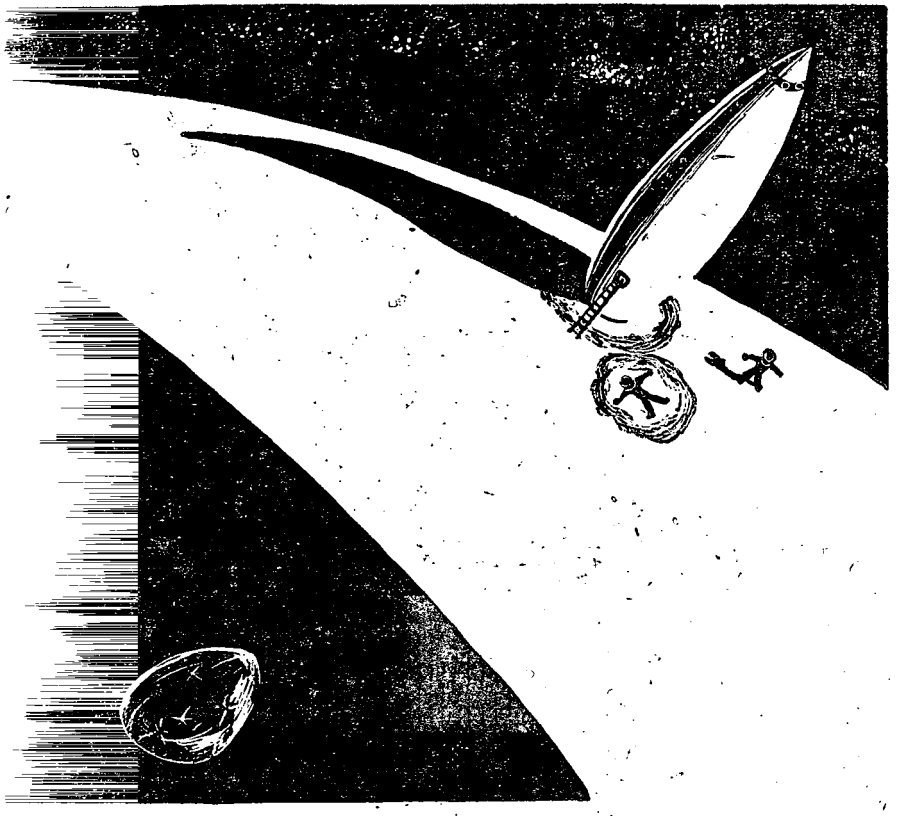

have looked like a six-foot egg made of greenish gelatin. Suspended in this were certain dark or radiant shapes which were Tommy's nerve centers and digestive organs, and scattered about its surface were star-shaped and oval markings which were his sensory organs and gripping mechanisms—his "hands." At the lesser end was an orifice which expelled a stream of glowing vapor, Tommy's means of propulsion. It should be clear that if instead of saying, "Tommy ate his lunch," or, "Tommy said to the Captain—" we reported what really happened, some pretty complicated explanations would have to be made.

Similarly, the term "cabin boy" is used because it is the closest

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in human meaning. Some vocations, like seafaring, are so demanding and so complex that they simply cannot be taught in classrooms; they have to be lived. A cabin boy is one who is learning such a vocation and paying for his instruction by performing certain menial, degrading, and unimportant tasks.

That certainly describes Tommy, with one more similarity—the cabin boy of the sailing vessel was traditionally occupied after each whipping with preparing the mischief, or the stupidity, that earned him the next one.

Tommy, at the moment, had a whipping coming to him, and was fighting a delaying action. He knew he couldn't escape eventual punishment, but he planned, with a wholehearted determination, to hold it off as long as he could.

Floating alertly in one of the innumerable corridors of the ship, he watched as a dark wave sprang into being upon the glowing corridor wall and sped toward him. Instantly, Tommy was moving away from it, and at the same rate of speed.

The wave rumbled: "Tommy! Tommy Loy! Where *is* that obscenity boy?"

The wave moved on, rumbling wordlessly, and Tommy moved with it. Ahead of him was another wave, and another beyond that, and it was the same throughout all the corridors of the ship. Abruptly the waves reversed their direction. So did Tommy, barely in time. The waves not only carried the Captain's orders, but scanned every corridor and compartment of the ten-mile ship. But as long as Tommy kept between the waves, the Captain could not see him.

It did not strike Tommy as odd that the Captain never thought of keeping the scanning waves stationary and letting the search parties catch up to him. The Captain, like all the rest of the crew, was not very bright in comparison with Tommy. This was odd enough, but Tommy had long since given up trying to puzzle out the reason. It was part of his universe.

The trouble was that he could not keep this up forever, and he was being searched for by other lowly members of the crew. It took a long time to traverse each of those winding, interlaced passages, but it was a mathematical certainty that he would be caught eventually.

Tommy shuddered, and at the same time he squirmed with delight. He had interrupted the Old Man's sleep by a stench of a particularly noisome variety, one of which he had only lately found himself capable. The effect had been beautiful. In human terms, since Tommy's race communi-

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cated by odors, it was equivalent to setting off a firecracker beside a sleeper's ear.

Judging by the jerkiness of the scanning waves' motion, the Old Man was still unnerved.

"Tommy!" the waves rumbled. "Come out, you little piece of filth, or I'll smash you into a thousand separate stinks! By Spore, when I get hold of you—"

The corridor intersected another at this point, and Tommy seized his chance to duck into the new one. He had been working his way outward ever since his crime, knowing that the search parties would do the same. When he reached the outermost level of the ship, there would be a slight possibility of slipping back past the hunters — not much of a chance, but better than none.

He kept close to the wall. He was the smallest member of the crew—smaller than any of the other cabin boys, and less than half the size of an Ordinary; it was always possible that when he sighted one of the search party, he could get away before the crewman saw him. He was in a short connecting corridor now, but the scanning waves cycled endlessly, always turning back before he could escape into the next corridor. Tommy followed their movement patiently, while he listened to the torrent of abuse that poured from them. He snickered fragrantly to himself. When the Old Man was angry, everybody suffered. The ship would be stinking from stem to stern by now.

EVENTUALLY the Captain forgot himself and the waves flowed on around the next intersection. Tommy moved on. He was getting close to his goal by now; he could see a faint gleam of starshine up at the end of the corridor.

The next turn took him into it — and what Tommy saw through the semi-transparent skin of the ship nearly made him falter and get caught. Not merely the fiery pinpoints of stars shone there, but a great, furious glow which could only mean that they were passing through a star system. It was the first time this had happened in Tommy's life, but of course it was nothing to the Captain, or even to most of the Ordinaries. Trust them, Tommy thought resentfully, to say nothing to him about it!

Now he knew he was glad he'd tossed that surprise at the Captain. If he hadn't, he wouldn't be here, and if he weren't here—

A waste capsule was bumping automatically along the corridor, heading for one of the exit pores in the hull. Tommy let it catch up to him, then englobed it, but it stretched him so tight that he

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could barely hold it. That was all to the good; the Captain wouldn't be likely to notice that anything had happened.

The hull was sealed, not to keep atmosphere inside, for there was none except by accident, but to prevent loss of liquid by evaporation. Metals and other mineral elements were replaceable; liquids and their constituents, in ordinary circumstances, were not.

Tommy rode the capsule to the exit sphincter, squeezed through, and instantly released it. Being polarized away from the ship's core, it shot into space and was lost. Tommy hugged the outer surface of the hull, and gazed at the astonishing panorama that surrounded him.

There was the enormous black half-globe of space — Tommy's sky, the only one he had ever known. It was sprinkled with the familiar yet always changing patterns of the stars. By themselves, these were marvels enough for a child whose normal universe was one of ninety-foot corridors and chambers measuring, at most, three times as much. But Tommy hardly noticed them. Down to his right, reflecting brilliantly from the long, gentle curve of the greenish hull, was a blazing yellow-white glory that he could hardly look at. A star, the first one he had ever seen close at hand. Off to the left was a tiny, milky-blue disk that could only be a planet.

Tommy let go a shout, for the sheer pleasure of its thin, hollow sound, or, if you prefer, smell. He watched the thin mist of particles spread lazily away from his body, faintly luminous against the jet blackness. He shivered a little, thickening his skin as much as he could. He could not stay long, he knew; he was radiating heat faster than he could absorb it from the sun on the ship's hull.

But he didn't want to go back inside, and not only because it meant being caught and punished. He didn't want to leave that great, dazzling jewel in the sky. For an instant he thought vaguely of the future time when he would be grown, the master of his own vessel, and could see the stars whenever he chose; but the picture was too far away to have any reality. Great Spore, that wouldn't happen for twenty thousand years!

Fifty yards away, an enormous dark spot on the hull, one of the ship's vision devices, swelled and darkened. Tommy looked up with interest. He could see nothing in that direction, but evidently the Captain had spotted something. Tommy watched and waited, growing colder every second, and after a long time he saw a new pinpoint of light spring into being. It grew steadily larger, turned

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fuzzy at one side, then became two linked dots, one hard and bright, the other misty.

Tommy looked down with sudden understanding, and saw that another wide area of the ship's hull was swollen and protruding. This one showed a pale color under the green and had a dark ring around it: it was a polarizer. The object he had seen must contain metal, and the Captain was bringing it in for fuel. Tommy hoped it was a big one; they had been short of metal ever since he could remember.

When he glanced up again, the object was much larger. He could see now that the bright part was hard and smooth, reflecting the light of the nearby sun. The misty part was a puzzler. It looked like a crewman's voice, seen against space—or the ion trail of a ship in motion. But was it possible for metal to be alive?

II

LEO ROGET stared into the rear-view scanner and wiped beads of sweat from his brown, half-bald scalp. Flaming gas from the jets washed up toward him along the hull; he couldn't see much. But the huge dark void they were headed for was still there, and it was getting bigger. He glanced futilely at the control board. The throttle was on full. They were going to crash in a little more than two minutes, and there didn't seem to be a single thing he could do about it.

He looked at Frances McMenamin, strapped into the acceleration harness beside his own. She said, "Try cutting off the jets, why don't you?"

Roget was a short, muscular man with not very much straight black hair and sharp brown eyes. McMenamin was slender and ash-blonde, half an inch taller than he was, with one of those pale, exquisitely shaped faces that seem to be distributed equally among the very stupid and the very bright. Roget had never been perfectly sure which she was, although they had been companions for more than three years. That, in a way, was part of the reason they had taken this pretty wild trip: she had made Roget uneasy, and he wanted to break away, and at the same time he didn't. So he had fallen in with her idea of a trip to Mars—"to get off by ourselves and think"—and here, Roget thought, they were, not thinking particularly.

He said, "You want us to crash quicker?"

"How do you know we will?" she countered. "It's the only thing we haven't tried. Anyhow, we'd be able to see where we're going, and that's more than we can do now."

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"All right," said Roget, "all *right*." She was perfectly capable of giving him six more reasons, each screwier than the last, and then turning out to be justified. He pulled the throttle back to zero, and the half-heard, half-felt roar of the jets died.

The ship jerked backward suddenly, yanking them against the couch straps, and then slowed.

Roget looked into the scanner again. They were approaching the huge object, whatever it was, at about the same rate as before. Maybe, he admitted unwillingly, a little slower. Damn the woman! How could she possibly have figured that one out in advance?

"And," McMenamin added reasonably, "we'll save fuel for the takeoff."

Roget scowled at her. "If there is a takeoff," he said. "Whatever is pulling us down there isn't doing it to show off. What do we do—tell them that was a very impressive trick and we enjoyed it, but we've got to be leaving now?"

"We'll find out what's doing it," said McMenamin, "and stop it if we can. If we can't, the fuel won't do us any good anyway."

That was, if not Frances' most exasperating trick, at least high on the list. She had a habit of introducing your own argument as if it were not only a telling point on her side, but something you had been too dense to see. Arguing with her was like swinging at someone who abruptly disappeared and then sandbagged you from behind.

Roget was fuming, but he said nothing. The greenish surface below was approaching more and more slowly, and now he felt a slight but definite tightening of the couch straps that could only mean deceleration. They were being maneuvered in for a landing as carefully and efficiently as if they were doing it themselves.

A few seconds later, a green horizon line appeared in the direct-view ports, and they touched. Roget's and McMenamin's couches swung on their gimbals as the ship tilted slowly, bounced and came to rest.

Frances reached inside the wide collar of her pressure suit to smooth a ruffle that had got crumpled between the volcanic swell of her bosom and the front of the transparent suit. Watching her, Roget felt a sudden irrational flow of affection and—as usually happened—a simultaneous notification that his body disagreed with his mind's opinion of her. She was nuts, but he couldn't do without her. This trip, it had been tacitly agreed, was to be a kind of final trial period. At the end of it, either they would split up or decide to make it permanent, and up to now, Roget had been si-

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lently determined that it was going to be a split. Now he was just as sure that, providing they ever got to Mars or back to Earth, he was going to nail her for good.

He glanced at her face. She knew, all right, just as she'd known when he'd felt the other way. It should have irritated him, but he felt oddly pleased and comforted. He unstrapped himself, fastened down his helmet, and moved toward the airlock.

"Be careful," she said.

"Yeah." He looked at her. "Be back in a minute."

She smiled—not a big one, for show, but the little, quiet kind that lit up her face. Roget grinned back and closed the airlock door behind him.

He stood on a pale-green, almost featureless surface that curved gently away in every direction. Where he stood, it was brilliantly lit by the sun, and his shadow was sharp and as black as space. About two-thirds of the way to the horizon, looking across the short axis of the ship, the sunlight stopped with knife-edge sharpness, and he could make out the rest only as a ghostly reflection of starlight.

Their ship was lying on its side, with the pointed stern apparently sunk a few inches into the green surface of the alien ship. He took a cautious step in that direction, and nearly floated past it before he could catch himself. His boot magnets had failed to grip. The metal of this hull—if it *was* metal—must be something that contained no steel.

The green hull was shot through with other colors here, and it rose in a curious, almost rectangular mound. At the center, just at the tip of the Earth vessel's jets, there was a pale area; around that was a dark ring which lapped up over the side of the ship. He bent to examine it. It was in shadow, and he used his helmet light.

The light shone through the mottled green substance; he could see the skin of his own ship. It was pitted, corroding. As he watched, another pinpoint of corruption appeared on the shiny surface, and slowly grew.

Roget straightened up with an exclamation. His helmet phones asked, "What is it, Leo?"

He said, "Acid or something eating the hull. Wait a minute." He looked again at the pale and dark mottlings under the green surface. The center area was not attacking the ship's metal; that might be the muzzle of whatever instrument had been used to pull them down out of their orbit and hold them there. But if it was turned off now— He had to get the ship away from the dark ring that was destroying it. He couldn't fire the jets otherwise,

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because they were half-buried; he'd blow the tubes if he tried.

He said, "You still strapped in?"

"Yes."

"All right, hold on." He stepped back to the center of the little ship, braced his corrugated boot soles against the hard green surface, and shoved.

The ship rolled. But it rolled like a top, around the axis of its pointed end. The dark area gave way before it, as if it were jelly-soft. The jets still pointed to the middle of the pale area, and the dark ring still lapped over them. Roget moved farther down and tried again, with the same result. The ship would move freely in every direction but the right one. The attracting power, clearly enough, was still on.

HE straightened dejectedly and looked around. A few hundred yards away, he saw something he had noticed before, without attaching any significance to it: a six-foot egg, of some lighter, more translucent substance than the one on which it lay. He leaped toward it. It moved sluggishly away, trailing a cloud of luminous gas. A few seconds later he had it between his gloved hands. It squirmed, then ejected a thin spurt of vapor from its forward end. It was alive.

McMenamin's head was silhouetted in one of the forward ports. He said, "See this?"

"Yes! What is it?"

"One of the crew, I think. I'm going to bring it in. You work the airlock—it won't hold both of us at once."

" . . . All right."

The huge egg crowded the cabin uncomfortably. It was pressed up against the rear wall, where it had rolled as soon as Frances had pulled it into the ship. The two humans stood at the other side of the room, against the control panel, and watched it.

"No features," said Roget, "unless you count those markings on the surface. This thing isn't from anywhere in the Solar System, Frances—it isn't even any order of evolution we ever heard of."

"I know," she said abstractedly. "Leo, is he wearing any protection against space that you can see?"

"No," said Roget. "That's *him*, not a spacesuit. Look, you can see halfway into him. But—"

Frances turned to look at him. "That's it," she said. "It means this is his natural element—space!"

Roget looked thoughtfully at the egg. "It makes sense," he said. "He's adapted for it, anyhow—ovoid, for a high volume-to-surface ratio. Tough outer shell. Moves by jet propulsion.

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It's hard to believe, because we've never run into a creature like him before, but I don't see why not. On Earth there are organisms, plants, that can live and reproduce in boiling water, and others that can stand near-zero temperatures."

"He's a plant, too, you know," Frances put in.

Roget stared at her, then back at the egg. "That color, you mean? Chlorophyl. It could be."

"Must be," she corrected firmly. "How else would he live in a vacuum?" And then, distressedly, "Oh, what a smell!"

They looked at each other. It *had* been something monumental in the way of smells, though it had only lasted a fraction of a second. There had been a series of separate odors, all unfamiliar and all overpoweringly strong. At least a dozen of them, Roget thought; they had gone past too quickly to count.

"He did it before, outside, and I saw the vapor." He closed his helmet abruptly and motioned McMenamin to do the same. She frowned and shook her head. He opened his helmet again. "It might be poisonous!"

"I don't think so," said McMenamin. "Anyway, we've got to try something." She walked toward the green egg. It rolled away from her, and she went past it into the bedroom.

In a minute she reappeared, carrying an armload of plastic boxes and bottles. She came back to Roget and knelt on the floor, lining up the containers with their nipples toward the egg.

"What's this for?" Roget demanded. "Listen, we've got to figure some way of getting out of here. The ship's being eaten up—"

"Wait," said McMenamin. She reached down and squeezed three of the nipples quickly, one after the other. There was a tiny spray of face powder, then one of cologne (*Nuit Juvienne*), followed by a jet of good Scotch.

Then she waited. Roget was about to open his mouth when another blast of unfamiliar odors came from the egg. This time there were only three: two sweet ones and one sharp.

McMENAMIN smiled. "I'm going to name him Stinky," she said. She pressed the nipples again, in a different order. Scotch, face powder, *Nuit Juvienne*. The egg replied: sharp, sweet, sweet.

She gave him the remaining combination, and he echoed it; then she put a record cylinder on the floor and squirted the face powder. She added another cylinder and squeezed the cologne. She went along the line that way, releasing a smell for each cylinder until there were ten. The egg had responded, recognizably in some

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cases, to each one. Then she took away seven of the cylinders and looked expectantly at the egg.

The egg released a sharp odor.

"If ever we tell anybody," said Roget in an awed tone, "that you taught a six-foot Easter egg to count to ten by selected flatulence—"

"Hush, fool," she said. "This is a tough one."

She lined up three cylinders, waited for the sharp odor, then added six more to make three rows of three. The egg obliged with a penetrating smell which was a good imitation of citron extract, Frances' number nine. He followed it immediately with another of his own rapid, complicated series of smells.

"He gets it," said McMenamin. "I think he just told us that three times three are nine." She stood up. "You go out first, Leo. I'll put him out after you and then follow. There's something more we've got to show him before we let him go."

Roget followed orders. When the egg came out and kept on going, he stepped in its path and held it back. Then he moved away, hoping the thing would get the idea that they weren't trying to force it, but wanted it to stay. The egg wobbled indecisively for a moment, and then stayed where it was. Frances came out the next minute, carrying one of the plastic boxes and a portable flashlight.

"My nicest powder," she said regretfully, "but it was the only thing I could find enough of." She clapped her gloved hands together sharply, with the box between them. It burst, and a haze of particles spread around them, glowing faintly in the sunlight.

The egg was still waiting, somehow giving the impression that it was watching them alertly. McMenamin flicked on the flashlight and pointed it at Roget. It made a clear, narrow path in the haze of dispersed particles. Then she turned it on herself, on the ship, and finally upward, toward the tiny blue disk that was Earth. She did it twice more, then stepped back toward the airlock, and Roget followed her.

They stood watching as Tommy scurried off across the hull, squeezed himself into it and disappeared.

"That was impressive," Roget said. "But I wonder just how much good it's going to do us."

"He knows we're alive, intelligent, friendly, and that we come from Earth," said McMenamin thoughtfully. "Or, anyhow, we did our best to tell him. That's all we can do. Maybe he won't want to help us; maybe he can't. But it's up to him now."

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III

THE mental state of Tommy, as he dived through the hull of the ship and into the nearest radial corridor, would be difficult to describe fully to any human being. He was the equivalent of a very small boy—that approximation still holds good—and he had the obvious reactions to novelty and adventure. But there was a good deal more. He had seen living, intelligent beings of an unfamiliar shape and substance, who lived in metal and had some connection with one of those enormous, enigmatic ships called planets, which no captain of his own race dared approach.

And yet Tommy *knew*, with all the weight of knowledge accumulated, codified and transmitted over a span measured in billions of years, that there was no other intelligent race than his own in the entire universe, that metal, though life-giving, could not itself be alive, and that no living creature, having the ill luck to be spawned aboard a planet, could ever hope to escape so tremendous a gravitational field.

The final result of all this was that Tommy desperately wanted to go somewhere by himself and think. But he couldn't; he had to keep moving, in time with the scanning waves along the corridor, and he had to give all his mental energy to the problem of slipping past the search party.

The question was—how long had he been gone? If they had reached the hull while he was inside the metal thing, they might have looked for him outside and concluded that he had somehow slipped past them, back to the center of the ship. In that case, they would probably be working their way back, and he had only to follow them to the axis and hide in a chamber as soon as they left it. But if they were still working outward, his chances of escape were almost nil. And now it seemed more important to escape than it had before.

There was one possibility which Tommy, who, in most circumstances, would try anything, hated to think about. Fuel lines—tubes carrying the rushing, radiant ion vapor that powered the ship — adjoined many of these corridors, and it was certain that if he dared to enter one, he would be perfectly safe from detection as long as he remained in it. But, for one thing, these lines radiated from the ship's axis and none of them would take him where he wanted to go. For another, they were the most dangerous place aboard ship. Older crew members sometimes entered them to make emergency repairs, but they got out as quickly as they could. Tommy did not know how long

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he could survive there; he had an unpleasant conviction that it would not be long.

Only a few yards up the corridor was the sealed sphincter which gave entrance to such a tube. Tommy looked at it indecisively as the motion of the scanning waves brought him nearer. He had still not made up his mind when he caught a flicker reflected around the curve of the corridor behind him.

Tommy squeezed himself closer to the wall and watched the other end of the corridor approach with agonizing slowness. If he could only get around that corner—

The flicker of motion was repeated, and then he saw a thin rind of green poke into view. There was no more time to consider entering the fuel line, no time to let the scanning waves' movement carry him around the corner. Tommy put on full speed, cutting across the next wave and down the cross-corridor ahead.

Instantly the Captain's voice shouted from the wall: "Ah! Was that him, the dirty scut? After him, lads!"

Tommy glanced behind as he turned another corner, and his heart sank. It was no cabin boy who was behind him, or even an Ordinary, but a Third Mate—so huge that he filled nearly half the width of the corridor, and so powerful that Tommy, in comparison, was like a boy on a bicycle racing an express train.

He turned another corner, realizing in that instant that he was as good as caught: the new corridor ahead of him stretched straight and without a break for three hundred yards. As he flashed down it, the hulk of the Mate appeared around the bend behind. The Captain's voice bellowed, "Get the little essence of putrescence!"

The Mate was coming up with terrifying speed, and Tommy had time for only one last desperate spurt. Then the other body slammed with stunning force against his, and he was held fast.

As they coasted to a halt, the Captain's voice rumbled from the wall: "*That's* it, Mister. Hold him where I can see him!"

The scanning areas were stationary now. The Mate moved Tommy forward until he was squarely in range of the nearest.

Tommy squirmed futilely. The Captain said, "*There's* our little jokester. It's a pure pleasure to see you again, Tommy. What—no witty remarks? Your humor all dried up?"

Tommy gasped, "Hope you enjoyed your nap, Captain."

"Very good," said the Captain with heavy sarcasm. "Oh, *very* entertaining, Tommy. Now would you have anything more to say, before I put the whips to you?"

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Tommy was silent.

The Captain said to the Mate, "Nice work, Mister. You'll get extra rations for this."

The Mate spoke for the first time, and Tommy recognized his high, affected voice. It was George Adkins—to choose a name only for identification purposes—who had recently spored and was so proud of the new life inside his body that there was no living with him. George said prissily, "Thank you, sir, I'm sure. Of course, I really shouldn't have exerted myself the way I just did, in my state."

"Well, you'll be compensated for it," the Captain said testily. "Now take the humorist down to Assembly Five. We'll have a little ceremony there."

"Yes, sir," said the Mate distantly. He moved off, shoving Tommy ahead of him, and dived into the first turning that led downward.

They moved along in silence for the better part of a mile, crossing from one lesser passage to another until they reached a main artery that led directly to the center of the ship. The scanning waves were still stationary, and they were moving so swiftly that there was no danger of being overheard. Tommy said politely, "You won't let them be too hard on me, will you, sir?"

The Mate did not reply for a moment. He had been baited by Tommy's mock courtesy before, and he was as wary as his limited intelligence allowed. Finally he said, "You'll get no more than what's coming to you, young Tom."

"Yes, sir. I know that, sir. I'm sorry I made you exert yourself, sir, in your condition and all."

"You should be," said the Mate stiffly, but his voice betrayed his pleasure. It was seldom enough that even a cabin boy showed a decent interest in the Mate's prospective parenthood. "They're moving about, you know," he added, unbending a little.

"Are they, sir? Oh, you must be careful of yourself, sir. How many are there, please, sir?"

"Twenty-eight," said the Mate, as he had on every possible occasion for the past two weeks. "Strong and healthy—so far."

"That's remarkable, sir!" cried Tommy. "Twenty-eight! If I might be so bold, sir, you ought to be careful of what you eat. Is the Captain going to give you your extra rations out of that mass he just brought in topside, sir?"

"I'm sure *I* don't know."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Tommy. "I wish I could be sure—"

He let the pause grow. Finally the Mate said querulously, "What do you mean? Is there anything wrong with the metal?"

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"I don't really know, sir, but it isn't like any we ever had before. That is," Tommy added, "since I was spored, sir."

"Naturally," said the Mate. "*I've* eaten all kinds myself, you know."

"Yes, sir. But doesn't it usually come in ragged shapes, sir, and darkish?"

"Of course it does. Everybody knows that. Metal is non-living, and only living things have regular shapes."

"Yes, sir. But I was topside, sir, while I was trying to get away, and I saw this metal. It's quite regular, except for some knobs at one end, sir, and it's as smooth as you are, sir, and shiny. If you'll forgive me, sir, it didn't look at all appetizing to me."

"Nonsense," said the Mate uncertainly. "Nonsense," he repeated, in a stronger tone. "You must have been mistaken. Metal can't be alive."

"That's just what I thought, sir," said Tommy excitedly. "But there are live things in this metal, sir. I saw them. And the metal wasn't just floating along the way it's supposed to, sir. I saw it when the Captain brought it down, and . . . But I'm afraid you'll think I'm lying, sir, if I tell you what it was doing."

"Well, what was it doing?"

"I swear I saw it, sir," Tommy went on. "The Captain will tell you the same thing, sir, if you ask him—he must have noticed."

"Sterilize it all, what *was* it doing?"

Tommy lowered his voice. "There was an ion trail shooting from it, sir. It was trying to get away!"

While the Mate was trying to absorb that, they reached the bottom of the corridor and entered the vast globular space of Assembly Five, lined with crewmen waiting to witness the punishment of Tommy Loy.

This was not going to be any fun at all, thought Tommy, but at least he had paid back the Third Mate in full measure. The Mate, for the moment, at any rate, was not taking any joy in his promised extra rations.

WHEN it was over, Tommy huddled in a corner of the crew compartment where they had tossed him, bruised and smarting in every nerve, shaken by the beating he had undergone. The pain was still rolling through him in faint, uncontrollable waves, and he winced at each one, in spite of himself, as though it were the original blow.

In the back of his mind, the puzzle of the metal ship was still calling, but the other experience was too fresh, the remembered images too vivid.

The Captain had begun, as al-

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ways, by reciting the Creed.

In the beginning was the Spore, and the Spore was lone.

(And the crew: *Praised be the Spore!*)

Next there was light, and the light was good: Yea, good for the Spore and the Spore's First Children.

(*Praised be they!*)

But the light grew evil in the days of the Spore's Second Children.

(*Woe unto them!*)

And the light cast them out. Yea, exiled were they, into the darkness and the Great Deep.

(*Pity for the outcasts in the Great Deep!*)

Tommy had mumbled his response with the rest of them, thinking rebellious thoughts. There was nothing evil about light; they lived by it still. What must have happened—the Captain himself admitted as much when he taught history and natural science classes—was that the earliest ancestors of the race, spawned in the flaming heart of the Galaxy, had grown too efficient for their own good.

They had specialized, more and more, in extracting energy from starlight and the random metal and other elements they encountered in space; and at last they absorbed, willy-nilly, more than they could use. So they had moved, gradually and naturally, over many generations, out from that intensely radiating region into the "Great Deep"—the universe of thinly scattered stars. And the process had continued, inevitably; as the level of available energy fell, their absorption of it grew more and more efficient.

Now, not only could they never return to their birthplace, but they could not even approach a single sun as closely as some planets did. Therefore the planets, and the stars themselves, were objects of fear. That was natural and sensible. But why did they have to continue this silly ritual, invented by some half-evolved, superstitious ancestor, of "outcasts" and "evil?"

The Captain finished:

Save us from the Death that lies in the Great Deep . . .

(*The creeping Death that lies in the Great Deep!*)

And keep our minds pure . . .

(*As pure as the light in the days of the Spore, blessed be He!*)

And our course straight . . .

(*As straight as the light, brothers!*)

That we may meet our lost brothers again in the Day of Reuniting.

(*Speed that day!*)

Then the pause, the silence that grew until it was like the silence of space. At last the Captain spoke again, pronouncing judgment against Tommy, ending:

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"Let him be whipped!"

Tommy tensed himself, thickening his skin, drawing his body into the smallest possible compass. Two husky Ordinaries seized him and tossed him at a third. As Tommy floated across the room, the crewman pressed himself tightly against the wall, drawing power from it until he could contain no more. And as Tommy neared him, he discharged it in a crackling arc that filled Tommy's body with the pure essence of pain, and sent him hurtling across the chamber to the next shock—and the next—and the next—

Until the Captain boomed, "Enough!" and they had carried him out and left him here alone.

HE heard the voices of crewmen as they drew their rations. One of them was grumbling about the taste, and another, sounding happily bloated, was telling him to shut up and eat. that metal was metal.

That would be the new metal, however much of it had been absorbed by now, mingled with the old in the reservoir. Tommy wondered briefly how much of it there was, and whether the alien ship—if it *was* a ship—could repair even a little damage to itself. But that assumed life in the metal, and in spite of what he had seen, Tommy couldn't believe in it. It seemed beyond question, though, that there were living things inside the metal; and when the metal was gone, how would they live?

Tommy imagined himself set adrift from the ship, alone in space, radiating more heat than his tiny volume could absorb. He shuddered.

He thought again of the problem that had obsessed him ever since he had seen the alien, five-pointed creatures in the metal ship. Intelligent life was supposed to be sacred. That was part of the Creed, and it was stated in a sloppy, poetic way like the rest of it, but it made a certain kind of sense. No crewman or Captain had the right to destroy another for his benefit, because the same heredity was in them all. They were all potentially the same, none better than another.

And you ate metal, because metal was non-living and certainly not intelligent. But if that stopped being true. . . ?

Tommy felt he was missing something. Then he had it: In the alien ship, trying to talk to the creatures that lived in metal, he had been scared almost scentless—but underneath the fright and the excitement, he had felt wonderful. It had been, he realized suddenly, like the mystic completion that was supposed to come when all the straight lines met, in the "Day of Reuniting"—

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when all the far-flung ships, parted for all the billions of years of their flight, came together at last. It was talking to someone different from yourself.

He wanted to talk again to the aliens, teach them to form their uncouth sounds into words, learn from them . . . Vague images swirled in his mind. They were products of an utterly different line of evolution. Who knew what they might be able to teach him?

And now the dilemma took shape. If his own ship absorbed the metal of theirs, they would die; therefore he would have to make the Captain let them go. But if he somehow managed to set them free, they would leave and he would never see them again.

A petty officer looked into the cubicle and said, "All right, Loy, out of it. You're on garbage detail. You eat after you work, if there's anything left. Lively, now!"

Tommy moved thoughtfully out into the corridor, his pain almost forgotten. The philosophical problems presented by the alien ship, too, having no apparent solution, were receding from his mind. A new thought was taking their place, one that made him glow inside with the pure rapture of the devoted practical jokester.

The whipping he was certainly going to get—and, so soon after the last offense, it would be a beauty — scarcely entered his mind.

IV

ROGET climbed in, opening his helmet, and sat down warily in the acceleration couch. He didn't look at the woman.

McMenamin said quietly, "Bad?"

"Not good. The outer skin's gone all across that area, and it's eating into the lead sheathing. The tubes are holding up pretty well, but they'll be next."

"We've done as much as we can, by rolling the ship around?"

"Just about. I'll keep at it, but I don't see how it can be more than a few hours before the tubes go. Then we're cooked, whatever your fragrant little friend does."

He stood up abruptly and climbed over the slanting wall which was now their floor, to peer out the direct-view port. He swore, slowly and bitterly. "You try the radio again while I was out?" he asked.

"Yes." She did not bother to add that there had been no response. Here, almost halfway between the orbits of Earth and Mars, they were hopelessly out of touch. A ship as small as theirs couldn't carry equipment enough to bridge the distance.

Roget turned around, said, "By

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God—". And then clenched his jaw and strode out of the room. McMenamin heard him walk through the bedroom and clatter around in the storage compartment behind.

In a few moments he was back with a welding torch in his hand. "Should have thought of this before," he said. "I don't know what'll happen if I cut into that hull—damn thing may explode, for all I know—but it's better than sitting doing nothing." He put his helmet down with a bang and his voice came tinnily in her helmet receiver. "Be back in a minute."

"Be careful," McMenamin said again.

Roget closed the outer lock door behind him and looked at the ravished hull of the ship. The metal had been eaten away in a broad band all around the ship, just above the tail, as if a child had bitten around the small end of a pear. In places the clustered rocket tubes showed through like gnawed bones. He felt a renewed surge of anger, with fear deep under it.

A hundred years ago, he reminded himself, the earliest space voyagers had encountered situations as bad as this one, maybe worse. But Roget was a city man, bred for city virtues. He didn't, he decided, know quite how to feel or act. What were you supposed to do when you were about to die, fifteen million miles from home? Try to calm McMenamin—who was dangerously calm already—or show your true nobility by making one of those death-bed speeches you read in the popular histories? What about suggesting a little suicide pact? There was nothing in the ship that would give them a cleaner death than the one ahead of them. About all he could do would be to stab Frances, then himself, with a screwdriver.

Her voice said in the earphones, "You all right?"

He said, "Sure. Just going to try it." He lowered himself to the green surface, careful not to let his knees touch the dark, corrosive area. The torch was a small, easily manageable tool. He pointed the snout at the dark area where it lapped up over the hull, turned the switch on and pressed the button. Flame leaped out, washing over the dark surface. Roget felt the heat through his suit. He turned off the torch to see what effect it had had.

There was a deep, charred pit in the dark stuff, and it seemed to him that it had pulled back a little from the area it was attacking. It was more than he had expected. Encouraged, he tried again.

There was a sudden tremor under him and he leaped nervously

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to his feet, just in time to avoid the corrosive wave as it rolled under him. For a moment he was only conscious of the thick metal of his boot soles and the thinness of the fabric that covered his knees; then, as he was about to step back out of the way, he realized that it was not only the dark ring that had expanded, that was still expanding.

He moved jerkily—too late—as the pale center area swept toward and under him. Then he felt as if he had been struck by a mighty hammer.

His ears rang, and there was a mist in front of his eyes. He blinked, tried to raise an arm. It seemed to be stuck fast at the wrist and elbow. Panicked, he tried to push himself away and couldn't. As his vision cleared, he saw that he was spread-eagled on the pale disk that had spread out under him. The metal collars of his wrist and elbow joints, all the metal parts of his suit, were held immovably. The torch lay a few inches away from his right hand.

For a few moments, incredulously, Roget still tried to move. Then he stopped and lay in the prison of his suit, looking at the greenish-cream surface under his helmet.

Frances' voice said abruptly, "Leo, is anything wrong?"

Roget felt an instant relief that left him shaken and weak. His forehead was cold. He said after a moment, "Pulled a damn fool trick, Frances. Come out and help me if you can."

He heard a click as her helmet went down. He added anxiously, "But don't come near the pale part, or you'll get caught too."

After a while she said, "Darling, I can't think of anything to do."

Roget was feeling calmer, somehow not much afraid any more. He wondered how much oxygen was left in his suit. Not more than an hour, he thought. He said, "I know. I can't, either."

Later he called, "Frances?"

"Yes?"

"Roll the ship once in a while, will you? Might get through to the wiring or something, otherwise."

". . . All right."

After that, they didn't talk. There was a great deal to be said, but it was too late to say it.

V

TOMMY was on garbage detail with nine other unfortunates. It was a messy, hard, unpleasant business, fit only for a cabin boy—collecting waste from the compartment and corridor receptacles and pressing it into standard capsule-shapes, then hauling it to the nearest polarizer. But Tommy, under the suspicious eye of

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the petty officer in charge, worked with an apparent total absorption until they had cleaned out their section of the six inmost levels and were well into the seventh.

This was the best strategic place for Tommy's departure, since it was about midway from axis to hull, and the field of operations of any pursuit was correspondingly broadened. Also, the volume in which they labored had expanded wedgewise as they climbed, and the petty officer, though still determined to watch Tommy, could no longer keep him constantly in view.

Tommy saw the officer disappear around the curve of the corridor, and kept on working busily. He was still at it, with every appearance of innocence and industry, when the officer abruptly popped into sight again about three seconds later.

The officer stared at him with baffled disapproval and said unreasonably, "Come on, come on, Loy. Don't slack."

"Right," said Tommy, and scurried faster.

A moment later Third Mate Adkins hove majestically into view. The petty officer turned respectfully to face him.

"Keeping young Tom well occupied, I see," said the Mate.

"Yes, sir," said the officer. "Appears to be a reformed character, now, sir. Must have learned a lesson, one way or another."

"Ha!" said the Mate. "Very good. Oh, Loy, you might be interested in this—the Captain himself has told me that the new metal is perfectly all right. Unusually rich, in fact. I've had my first ration already—very good it was, too—and I'm going to get my extras in half an hour or so. Well, good appetite, all." And, while the lesser crewmen clustered against the walls to give him room, he moved haughtily off down the corridor.

Tommy kept on working as fast as he could. He was draining energy he might need later, but it was necessary to quiet the petty officer's suspicions entirely, in order to give himself a decent start. In addition, his artist's soul demanded it. Tommy, in his own way, was a perfectionist.

Third Mate Adkins was due to get his extras in about half an hour, and if Tommy knew the Captain's habits, the Captain would be taking his first meal from the newly replenished reservoir at about the same time. That set the deadline. Before the half hour was up, Tommy would have to cut off the flow of the new metal, so that stomachs which had been gurgling in anticipation would remain desolately void until the next windfall.

The Mate, in spite of his hypochondria, was a glutton. With any

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luck, this would make him bitter for a month. And the Old Man—but it was better not to dwell on that.

The petty officer hung around irresolutely for another ten minutes, then dashed off down the corridor to attend to the rest of his detail. Without wasting a moment, Tommy dropped the capsule he had just collected and shot away in the other direction.

The rest of the cabin boys, as fearful of Tommy as they were of constituted authority, would not dare to raise an outcry until they spotted the officer coming back. The officer, because of the time he had wasted in watching Tommy, would have to administer a thorough lecture on slackness to the rest of the detail before he returned.

Tommy had calculated his probable margin to a nicety, and it was enough, barring accidents, to get him safely away. Nevertheless, he turned and twisted from one system of corridors to another, carefully confusing his trail before he set himself to put as much vertical distance behind him as he could.

This part of the game had to be accomplished in a fury of action, for he was free to move in the corridors only until the Captain was informed that he was loose again. After that, he had to play hounds and hares with the moving strips through which the Captain could see him.

When the time he had estimated was three-quarters gone, Tommy slowed and came to a halt. He inspected the corridor wall minutely, and found the almost imperceptible trace that showed where the scanning wave nearest him had stopped. He jockeyed his body clear of it, and then waited. He still had a good distance to cover before he dared play his trump, but it was not safe to move now; he had to wait for the Captain's move.

It came soon enough: the scanning waves erupted into simultaneous motion and anger. "Tommy!" they bellowed. "Tommy Loy! Come back, you unmentionable excrescence, or by Spore you'll regret it! Tommy!"

Moving between waves, Tommy waited patiently until their motion carried him from one corridor to another. The Captain's control over the waves was not complete: in some corridors they moved two steps upward for one down, in others the reverse. When he got into a downward corridor, Tommy scrambled out of it again as soon as he could and started over.

Gradually, with many false starts, he worked his way up to the thirteenth level, one level short of the hull.

Now came the hard part. This

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time he had to enter the fuel lines, not only for sure escape, but to gather the force he needed. And for the first time in his life, Tommy hesitated before something that he had set himself to do.

Death was a phenomenon that normally touched each member of Tommy's race only once—only Captains died, and they died alone. For lesser members of the crew, there was almost no mortal danger; the ship protected them. But Tommy knew what death was, and as the sealed entrance to the fuel line swung into view, he knew that he faced it.

He made himself small, as he had under the lash. He broke the seal. Quickly, before the following wave could catch him, he thrust himself through the sphincter.

The blast of ions gripped him, flung him forward, hurting him like a hundred whips. Desperately he held himself together, thickening his insulating shell against that deadly flux of energy; but still his body absorbed it, till he felt a horrid fullness.

The walls of the tube fled past him, barely perceptible in the rush of glowing haze. Tommy held in that growing tautness with his last strength, meanwhile looking for an exit. He neither knew nor cared whether he had reached his goal; he had to get out or die.

He saw a dim oval on the wall ahead, hurled himself at it, clung,

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and forced his body through.

He was in a horizontal corridor, just under the hull. He drank the blessed coolness of it for an instant, before moving to the nearest sphincter. Then he was out, under the velvet-black sky and the diamond blaze of stars.

He looked around. The pain was fading now; he felt only an atrocious bloatedness that tightened his skin and made all his movements halting. Forward of him, up the long shallow curve of the hull, he could see the alien ship, and the two five-pointed creatures beside it. Carefully, keeping a few feet between himself and the hull, he headed toward it.

One of the creatures was sprawled flat on the polarizer that had brought its ship down. The other, standing beside it, turned as Tommy came near, and two of its upper three points moved in an insane fashion that made Tommy feel ill. He looked away quickly and moved past them, till he was directly over the center of the polarizer and only a few inches away.

Then, with a sob of relief, he released the energy his body had stored. In one thick, white bolt, it sparked to the polarizer's center.

Shaken and spent, Tommy floated upward and surveyed what he had done. The muzzle

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of the polarizer was contracting, puckering at the center, the dark corrosive ring following it in. So much energy, applied in one jolt, must have shorted and paralyzed it all the way back to the ship's nerve center. The Captain, Tommy thought wryly, would be jumping now!

And he wasn't done yet. Tommy took one last look at the aliens and their ship. The sprawled one was up now, and the two of them had their upper points twined around each other in a nauseating fashion. Then they parted suddenly, and, facing Tommy, wiggled their free points. Tommy moved purposefully off across the width of the ship, heading for the three heavy-duty polarizers.

He had to go in again through that hell not once more, but twice. Though his nerves shrank from the necessity, there was no way of avoiding it. For the ship could not alter its course, except by allowing itself to be attracted by a sun or other large body—which was unthinkable — or it could rotate at the Captain's will. The aliens were free now, but the Captain had only to spin ship in order to snare them again.

Four miles away, Tommy found the second polarizer. He backed away a carefully calculated distance before he re-entered the hull. At least he could know in advance how far he had to go—and he knew now, too, that the energy he had stored the first time had been adequate twice over. He rested a few moments; then, like a diver plunging into a torrent, he thrust himself into the fuel line.

He came out again, shuddering with pain, and pushed himself through the exit. He felt as bloated as he had before. The charge of energy was not as great, but Tommy knew that he was weakening. This time, when he discharged over the polarizer and watched it contract into a tiny, puckered mass, he felt as if he could never move again, let alone expose himself once more to that tunnel of flame.

The stars, he realized dully, were moving in slow, ponderous arcs over his head. The Captain was spinning ship. Tommy sank to the hull and lay motionless, watching half-attentively for a sight of the alien ship.

There it was, a bright dot haloed by the flame of its exhaust. It swung around slowly, gradually, with the rest of the firmament, growing smaller slowly.

"He'll get them before they're out of range," Tommy thought. He watched as the bright dot climbed overhead, began to fall on the other side.

The Captain had one polarizer left. It would be enough.

Wearily Tommy rose and fol-

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lowed the bright star. It was not a joke any longer. He would willingly have gone inside to the bright, warm, familiar corridors that led downward to safety and deserved punishment. But somehow he could not bear to think of those fascinating creatures—those wonderful playthings — going to fill the Captain's fat belly.

Tommy followed the ship until he could see the pale gleam of the functioning polarizer. Then he crawled through the hull once more, and again he found a sealed entrance to the fuel tube. He did not let himself think about it. His mind was numb already, and he pushed himself through uncaring, as condemned criminals often go carelessly to execution.

This time it was worse than ever before; he had not dreamed that it could be so bad. His vision dimmed and he could barely see the exit, or feel its pressure, when he dragged himself out. Lurching drunkenly, he passed a scanning wave on his way to the hull sphincter, and heard the Captain's voice explode.

Outside, ragged black patches obscured his vision of the stars. The pressure inside him pressed painfully outward, again and again, and each time he held it back. Then he felt rather than saw that he was over the pale disk, and as he let go the bolt he lost consciousness.

When his vision cleared, the alien ship was still above him, alarmingly close. The Captain must have had it almost reeled in again, he thought, when he had let go that last charge.

Flaming, it receded into the Great Deep, and he watched it go until it shrank beyond his vision to follow.

He felt a great peace and a great weariness. The tiny blue disk that was a planet had moved its apparent position a little nearer its star. The aliens were going back there, to their unimaginable home, and Tommy's ship was forging onward into new depths of darkness—toward the edge of the Galaxy and the greatest Deep.

He moved to the nearest sphincter as the cold bit at him. His spirits lifted suddenly as he thought of those three stabs of energy, equally spaced around the twelve-mile perimeter of the ship. The Captain would be utterly speechless with rage, he thought, like an aged martinet who had had his hands painfully slapped by a small boy.

For, as we warned you, the Captain was not precisely a captain, nor the ship precisely a ship. Ship and Captain were one and the same, hive and queen bee, castle and lord.

In effect, Tommy had circumnavigated the skipper.

—DAMON KNIGHT

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what is POSAT?

By PHYLLIS STERLING SMITH

THE following advertisement appeared in the July 1953 issue of several magazines:

MASTERY OF ALL KNOWLEDGE CAN BE YOURS!

What is the secret source of those profound principles that can solve the problems of life? Send for our FREE booklet of explanation.

Do not be a leaf in the wind! YOU can alter the course of your life!

Tap the treasury of Wisdom through the ages!

The Perpetual Order of Seekers After Truth

POSAT
an ancient secret society

Most readers passed it by with scarcely a glance. It was, after all, similar to the many that had appeared through the years under the name of that same society. Other readers, as their eyes slid over the familiar format of the ad, speculated idly about the persistent and mildly mysterious organization behind it. A few even resolved to clip the attached coupon and send for the booklet —sometime—when a pen or pencil was nearer at hand.

Bill Evans, an unemployed pharmacist, saw the ad in a copy of *Your Life and Psychology* that had been abandoned on his seat in the bus. He filled out the blanks on the coupon with a scrap of stubby pencil. "You can alter the course of your life!" he read again. He particularly liked that thought, even though he had long since ceased to believe it.

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Of course coming events cast their shadows before, but this shadow was 400 years long!

Illustrated by ED ALEXANDER

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He actually took the trouble to mail the coupon. After all, he had, literally, nothing to lose, and nothing else to occupy his time.

Miss Elizabeth Arnable was one of the few to whom the advertisement was unfamiliar. As a matter of fact, she very seldom read a magazine. The radio in her room took the place of reading matter, and she always liked to think that it amused her cats as well as herself. Reading would be so selfish under the circumstances, wouldn't it? Not but what the cats weren't almost smart enough to read, she always said.

It just so happened, however, that she had bought a copy of the *Antivivisectionist Gazette* the day before. She pounced upon the POSAT ad as a trout might snap at a particularly attractive fly. Having filled out the coupon with violet ink, she invented an errand that would take her past the neighborhood post office so that she could post it as soon as possible.

Donald Alford, research physicist, came acros the POSAT ad tucked at the bottom of a column in *The Bulletin of Physical Research*. He was engrossed in the latest paper by Dr. Crandon, a man whom he admired from the point of view of both a former student and a fellow research worker. Consequently, he was one of the many who passed over the POSAT ad with the disregard accorded to any common object.

He read with interest to the end of the article before he realized that some component of the advertisement had been noted by a region of his brain just beyond consciousness. It teased at him like a tickle that couldn't be scratched until he turned back to the page.

It was the symbol or emblem of POSAT, he realized, that had caught his attention. The perpendicularly crossed ellipses centered with a small black circle might almost be a conventionalized version of the Bohr atom of helium. He smiled with mild skepticism as he read through the printed matter that accompanied it.

"I wonder what their racket is," he mused. Then, because his typewriter was conveniently at hand, he carefully tore out the coupon and inserted it in the machine. The spacing of the typewriter didn't fit the dotted lines on the coupon, of course, but he didn't bother to correct it. He addressed an envelope, laid it with other mail to be posted, and promptly forgot all about it. Since he was a methodical man, it was entrusted to the U.S. mail early the next morning, together with his other letters.

Three identical forms accom-

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panied the booklet which POSAT sent in response to the three inquiries. The booklet gave no more information than had the original advertisement, but with considerable more volubility. It promised the recipient the secrets of the Cosmos and the key that would unlock the hidden knowledge within himself—if he would merely fill out the enclosed form.

Bill Evans, the unemployed pharmacist, let the paper lie unanswered for several days. To be quite honest, he was disappointed. Although he had mentally disclaimed all belief in anything that POSAT might offer, he had watched the return mails with anticipation. His own resources were almost at an end, and he had reached the point where intervention by something supernatural, or at least superhuman, seemed the only hope.

He had hoped, unreasonably, that POSAT had an answer. But time lay heavily upon him, and he used it one evening to write the requested information—about his employment (ha!), his religious beliefs, his reason for inquiring about POSAT, his financial situation. Without quite knowing that he did so, he communicated in his terse answers some of his desperation and sense of futility.

Miss Arnable was delighted with the opportunity for autobiographical composition. It required five extra sheets of paper to convey all the information that she wished to give—all about her poor, dear father who had been a missionary to China, and the kinship that she felt toward the mystic cults of the East, her belief that her cats were reincarnations of her loved ones (which, she stated, derived from a religion of the Persians; or was it the Egyptians?) and in her complete and absolute acceptance of everything that POSAT had stated in their booklet. And what would the dues be? She wished to join immediately. Fortunately, dear father had left her in a comfortable financial situation.

To Donald Alford, the booklet seemed to confirm his suspicion that POSAT was a racket of some sort. Why else would they be interested in his employment or financial position? It also served to increase his curiosity.

"What do you suppose they're driving at?" he asked his wife Betty, handing her the booklet and questionnaire.

"I don't really know what to say," she answered, squinting a little as she usually did when puzzled. "I know one thing, though, and that's that you won't stop until you find out!"

"The scientific attitude," he acknowledged with a grin.

"Why don't you fill out this questionnaire incognito, though?"

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she suggested. "Pretend that we're wealthy and see if they try to get our money. Do they have anything yet except your name and address?"

Don was shocked. "If I send this back to them, it will have to be with correct answers!"

"The scientific attitude again," Betty sighed. "Don't you ever let your imagination run away with the facts a bit? What are you going to give for your reasons for asking about POSAT?"

"Curiosity," he replied, and, pulling his fountain pen from his vest pocket, he wrote exactly that, in small, neat script.

It was unfortunate for his curiosity that Don could not see the contents of the three envelopes that were mailed from the offices of POSAT the following week. For this time they differed.

Bill Evans was once again disappointed. The pamphlet that was enclosed gave what apparently meant to be final answers to life's problems. They were couched in vaguely metaphysical terms and offered absolutely no help to him.

His disappointment was tempered, however, by the knowledge that he had unexpectedly found a job. Or, rather, it had fallen into his lap. When he had thought that every avenue of employment had been tried, a position had been offered him in a wholesale pharmacy in the older industrial part of the city. It was not a particularly attractive place to work, located as it was next to a large warehouse, but to him it was hope for the future.

It amused him to discover that the offices of POSAT were located on the other side of the same warehouse, at the end of a blind alley. Blind alley indeed! He felt vaguely ashamed for having placed any confidence in them.

Miss Arnable was thrilled to discover that her envelope contained not only several pamphlets, (she scanned the titles rapidly and found that one of them concerned the sacred cats of ancient Egypt), but that it contained also a small pin with the symbol of POSAT wrought in gold and black enamel. The covering letter said that she had been accepted as an active member of POSAT and that the dues were five dollars per month; please remit by return mail. She wrote a check immediately, and settled contentedly into a chair to peruse the article on sacred cats.

After a while she began to read aloud so that her own cats could enjoy it, too.

Don Alford would not have been surprised if his envelope had shown contents similar to the ones that the others received. The folded sheets of paper that he pulled forth, however, made him

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stiffen with sharp surprise.

"Come here a minute, Betty," he called, spreading them out carefully on the dining room table. "What do you make of these?"

She came, dish cloth in hand, and thoughtfully examined them, one by one. "Multiple choice questions! It looks like a psychological test of some sort."

"This isn't the kind of thing I expected them to send me," worried Don. "Look at the type of thing they ask. 'If you had discovered a new and virulent poison that could be compounded from common household ingredients, would you (1) publish the information in a daily newspaper, (2) manufacture it secretly and sell it as rodent exterminator, (3) give the information to the armed forces for use as a secret weapon, or (4) withhold the information entirely as too dangerous to be passed on?' "

"Could they be a spy ring?" asked Betty. "Subversive agents? Anxious to find out your scientific secrets like that classified stuff that you're so careful of when you bring it home from the lab?"

Don scanned the papers quickly. "There's nothing here that looks like an attempt to get information. Besides, I've told them nothing about my work except that I do research in physics. They don't even know what company I work for. If this is a psychological test, it measures attitudes, nothing else. Why should they want to know my attitudes?"

"Do you suppose that POSAT is really what it claims to be—a secret society—and that they actually screen their applicants?"

He smiled wryly. "Wouldn't it be interesting if I didn't make the grade after starting out to expose their racket?"

He pulled out his pen and sat down to the task of resolving the dilemmas before him.

His next communication from POSAT came to his business address and, paradoxically, was more personal than its forerunners.

Dear Doctor Alford:

We have examined with interest the information that you have sent to us. We are happy to inform you that, thus far, you have satisfied the requirements for membership in the Perpetual Order of Seekers After Truth. Before accepting new members into this ancient and honorable secret society, we find it desirable that they have a personal interview with the Grand Chairman of POSAT.

Accordingly, you are cordially invited to an audience with our Grand Chairman on Tuesday, July 10, at 2:30 P.M. Please let us know if this arrangement is acceptable to you. If not, we will attempt to make another appointment for you.

The time specified for the ap-

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pointment was hardly a convenient one for Don. At 2:30 P.M. on most Tuesdays, he would be at work in the laboratory. And while his employers made no complaint if he took his research problems home with him and worried over them half the night, they were not equally enthusiastic when he used working hours for pursuing unrelated interests. Moreover, the headquarters of POSAT was in a town almost a hundred miles distant. Could he afford to take a whole day off for chasing will-o-wisps?

It hardly seemed worth the trouble. He wondered if Betty would be disappointed if he dropped the whole matter. Since the letter had been sent to the laboratory instead of his home, he couldn't consult her about it without telephoning.

Since the letter had been sent to the laboratory instead of his home! But it was impossible!

He searched feverishly through his pile of daily mail for the envelope in which the letter had come. The address stared up at him, unmistakably and fearfully legible. The name of his company. The number of the room he worked in. In short, the address that he had never given them!

"Get hold of yourself," he commanded his frightened mind. "There's some perfectly logical, easy explanation for this. They looked it up in the directory of the Institute of Physics. Or in the alumni directory of the university. Or—or—"

But the more he thought about it, the more sinister it seemed. His laboratory address was available, but why should POSAT take the trouble of looking it up? Some prudent impulse had led him to withhold that particular bit of information, yet now, for some reason of their own, POSAT had unearthed the information.

His wife's words echoed in his mind, "Could they be a spy ring? Subversive agents?"

Don shook his head as though to clear away the confusion. His conservative habit of thought made him reject that explanation as too melodramatic.

At least one decision was easier to reach because of his doubts. Now he knew he had to keep his appointment with the Grand Chairman of POSAT.

He scribbled a memo to the department office stating that he would not be at work on Tuesday.

AT first Don Alford had some trouble locating the POSAT headquarters. It seemed to him that the block in which the street number would fall was occupied entirely by a huge sprawling warehouse, of concrete construc-

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tion, and almost entirely windowless. It was recessed from the street in several places to make room for the small, shabby buildings of a wholesale pharmacy, a printer's plant, an upholstering shop, and was also indented by alleys lined with loading platforms.

It was at the back of one of the alleys that he finally found a door marked with the now familiar emblem of POSAT.

He opened the frosted glass door with a feeling of misgiving, and faced a dark flight of stairs leading to the upper floor. Somewhere above him a buzzer sounded, evidently indicating his arrival. He picked his way up through the murky stairwell.

The reception room was hardly a cheerful place, with its battered desk facing the view of the empty alley, and a film of dust obscuring the pattern of the gray-looking wallpaper and worn rug. But the light of the summer afternoon filtering through the window scattered the gloom somewhat, enough to help Don doubt that he would find the menace here that he had come to expect.

The girl addressing envelopes at the desk looked very ordinary. *Not the Mata-Hari type,* thought Don, with an inward chuckle at his own suspicions. He handed her the letter.

She smiled. "We've been expecting you, Dr. Alford. If you'll just step into the next room—"

She opened a door opposite the stairwell, and Don stepped through it.

The sight of the luxurious room before him struck his eyes with the shock of a dentist's drill, so great was the contrast between it and the shabby reception room. For a moment Don had difficulty breathing. The rug — Don had seen one like it before, but it had been in a museum. The paintings on the walls, ornately framed in gilt carving, were surely old masters—of the Renaissance period, he guessed. Although he recognized none of the pictures, he felt that he could almost name the artists. That glowing one near the corner would probably be a Titian. Or was it Tintorretto? He regretted for a moment the lost opportunities of his college days, when he had passed up Art History in favor of Operational Circuit Analysis.

The girl opened a filing cabinet, the front of which was set flush with the wall, and, selecting a folder from it, disappeared through another door.

Don sprang to examine the picture near the corner. It was hung at eye level—that is, at the eye level of the average person. Don had to bend over a bit to see it properly. He searched for a signature. Apparently there was

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none. But did artists sign their pictures back in those days? He wished he knew more about such things.

Each of the paintings was individually lighted by a fluorescent tube held on brackets directly above it. As Don straightened up from his scrutiny of the picture, he inadvertently hit his head against the light. The tube, dislodged from its brackets, fell to the rug with a muffled thud.

Now I've done it! thought Don with dismay. But at least the tube hadn't shattered.

In fact—it was still glowing brightly! His eyes registered the fact, even while his mind refused to believe it. He raised his eyes to the brackets. They were simple pieces of solid hardware designed to support the tube.

There were no wires!

Don picked up the slender, glowing cylinder and held it between trembling fingers. Although it was delivering as much light as a two or three hundred watt bulb, it was cool to the touch. He examined it minutely. There was no possibility of concealed batteries.

The thumping of his heart was caused not by the fact that he had never seen a similar tube before, but because he had. He had never held one in his hands, though. The ones which his company had produced as experimental models had been unsuccessful at converting all of the radioactivity into light, and had, of necessity, been heavily shielded.

Right now, two of his colleagues back in the laboratory would still be searching for the right combination of fluorescent material and radioactive salts with which to make the simple, efficient, self-contained lighting unit that he was holding in his hand at this moment!

But this is impossible! he thought. *We're the only company that's working on this, and it's secret. There can't be any in actual production!*

And even if one had actually been successfully produced, how would it have fallen into the possession of POSAT, an Ancient Secret Society, The Perpetual Order of Seekers After Truth?

The conviction grew in Don's mind that here was something much deeper and more sinister than he would be able to cope with. He should have asked for help, should have stated his suspicions to the police or the F.B.I. Even now—

With sudden decision, he thrust the lighting tube into his pocket and stepped swiftly to the outer door. He grasped the knob and shook it impatiently when it stuck and refused to turn. He yanked at it. His impatience changed to panic. It was locked!

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A soft sound behind him made him whirl about. The secretary had entered again through the inner door. She glanced at the vacant light bracket, then significantly at his bulging pocket. Her gaze was still as bland and innocent as when he had entered, but to Don she no longer seemed ordinary. Her very calmness in the face of his odd actions was distressingly ominous.

"Our Grand Chairman will see you now," she said in a quiet voice.

Don realized that he was half crouched in the position of an animal expecting attack. He straightened up with what dignity he could manage to find.

She opened the inner door again and Don followed her into what he supposed to be the office of the Grand Chairman of POSAT.

Instead he found himself on a balcony along the side of a vast room, which must have been the interior of the warehouse that he had noted outside. The girl motioned him toward the far end of the balcony, where a frosted glass door marked the office of the Grand Chairman.

But Don could not will his legs to move. His heart beat at the sight of the room below him. It was a laboratory, but a laboratory the like of which he had never seen before. Most of the equipment was unfamiliar to him. Whatever he did recognize was of a different design than he had ever used, and there was something about it that convinced him that this was more advanced. The men who bent busily over their instruments did not raise their eyes to the figures on the balcony.

"Good Lord!" Don gasped. "That's an atomic reactor down there!" There could be no doubt about it, even though he could see it only obscurely through the bluish-green plastic shielding it.

His thoughts were so clamorous that he hardly realized that he had spoken aloud, or that the door at the end of the balcony had opened.

He was only dimly aware of the approaching footsteps as he speculated wildly on the nature of the shielding material. What could be so dense that only an inch would provide adequate shielding and yet remain semi-transparent?

His scientist's mind applauded the genius who had developed it, even as the alarming conviction grew that he wouldn't—couldn't—be allowed to leave here any more. Surely no man would be allowed to leave this place alive to tell the fantastic story to the world!

"Hello, Don," said a quiet voice beside him. "It's good to see you again."

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"Dr. Crandon!" he heard his own voice reply. "*You're* the Grand Chairman of POSAT?"

He felt betrayed and sick at heart. The very voice with which Crandon had spoken conjured up visions of quiet lecture halls and his own youthful excitement at the masterful and orderly disclosure of scientific facts. To find him here in this mad and treacherous place — didn't anything make sense any longer?

"I think we have rather abused you, Don," Dr. Crandon continued. His voice sounded so gentle that Don found it hard to think there was any evil in it. "I can see that you are suspicious of us, and—yes—afraid."

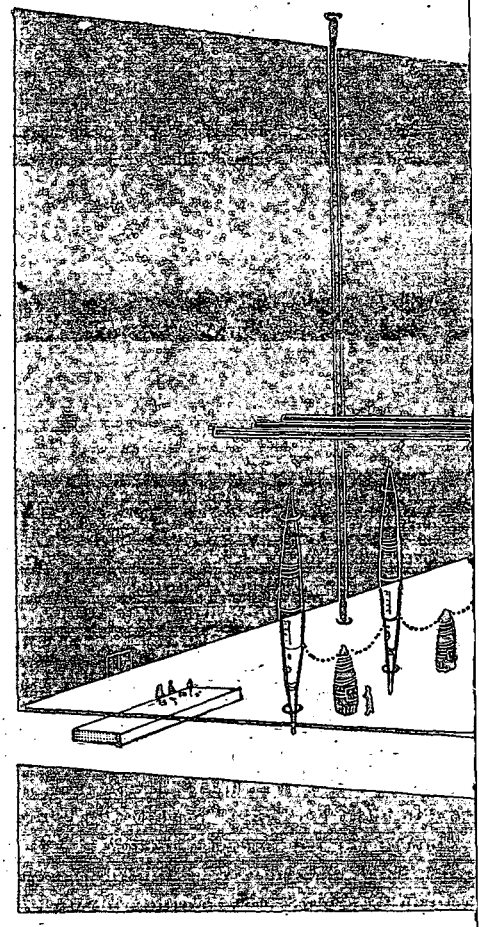
DON stared at the scene below him. After his initial glance to confirm his identification of Crandon, Don could not bear to look at him.

Crandon's voice suddenly hardened, became abrupt. "You're partly right about us, of course. I hate to think how many laws this organization has broken. Don't condemn us yet, though. You'll be a member yourself before the day is over."

Don was shocked by such confidence in his corruptibility.

"What do you use?" he asked bitterly. "Drugs? Hypnosis?"

Crandon sighed. "I forgot how little you know, Don. I have a



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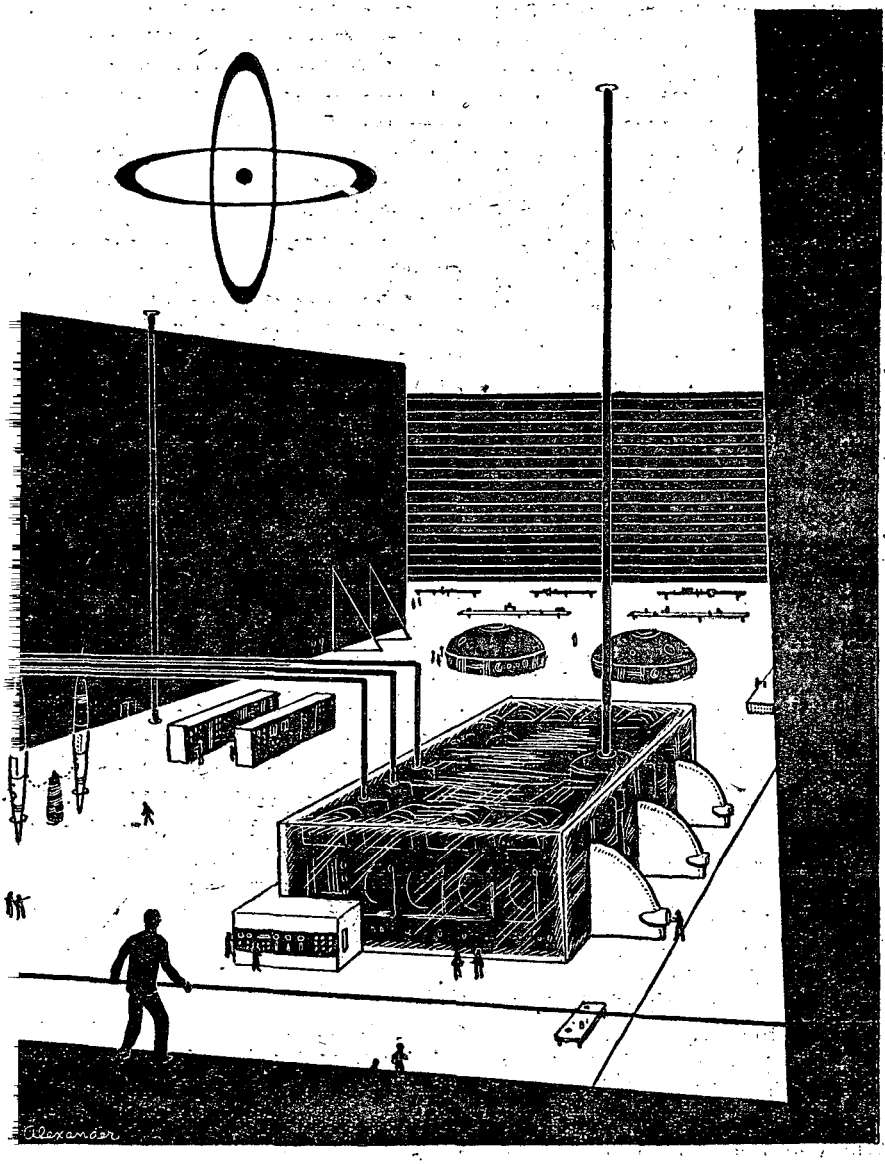

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long story to tell you. You'll find it hard to believe at first. But try to trust me. Try to believe me, as you once did. When I say that much of what POSAT does is illegal, I do not mean immoral. We're probably the most moral organization in the world. Get over the idea that you have stumbled into a den of thieves."

Crandon paused as though searching for words with which to continue.

"Did you notice the paintings in the waiting room as you entered?"

Don nodded, too bewildered to speak.

"They were donated by the founder of our organization. They were part of his personal collection — which, incidentally, he bought from the artists themselves. He also designed the atomic reactor we use for power here in the laboratory."

"Then the pictures are modern," said Don, aware that his mouth was hanging open foolishly. "I thought one was a Titian—"

"It is," said Crandon. "We have several original Titians, although I really don't know too much about them."

"But how could a man alive *today* buy paintings from an artist of the Renaissance?"

"He is not alive today. POSAT is actually what our advertisements claim—an *ancient* secret society. Our founder has been dead for over four centuries."

"But you said that he designed your atomic reactor."

"Yes. This particular one has been in use for only twenty years, however."

Don's confusion was complete. Crandon looked at him kindly. "Let's start at the beginning," he said, and Don was back again in the classroom with the deep voice of Professor Crandon unfolding the pages of knowledge in clear and logical manner. "Four hundred years ago, in the time of the Italian Renaissance, a man lived who was a super-genius. His was the kind of incredible mentality that appears not in every generation, or even every century, but once in thousands of years.

"Probably the man who invented what we call the phonetic alphabet was one like him. That man lived seven thousand years ago in Mesopotamia, and his discovery was so original, so far from the natural course of man's thinking, that not once in the intervening seven thousand years has that device been rediscovered. It still exists only in the civilizations to which it has been passed on directly.

"The super-genius who was our founder was not a semanticist. He was a physical scientist and mathematician. Starting with the

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meager heritage that existed in these fields in his time, he began tackling physical puzzles one by one. Sitting in his study, using as his principal tool his own great mind, he invented calculus, developed the quantum theory of light, moved on to electromagnetic radiation and what we call Maxwell's equations — although, of course, he antedated Maxwell by centuries—developed the special and general theories of relativity, the tool of wave mechanics, and finally, toward the end of his life, he mathematically derived the packing fraction that describes the binding energy of nuclei—"

"But it can't be done," Don objected. "It's an observed phenomenon. It hasn't been derived." Every conservative instinct that he possessed cried out against this impossible fantasy. And yet — there sat the reactor, sheathed in its strange shield. Crandon watched the direction of Don's glance.

"Yes, the reactor," said Crandon. "He built one like it. It confirmed his theories. His calculations showed him something else too. He saw the destructive potentialities of an atomic explosion. He himself could not have built an atomic bomb; he didn't have the facilities. But his knowledge would have enabled other men to do so. He looked about him. He saw a political setup of warring principalities, rival states, intrigue, and squabbles over political power. Giving the men of his time atomic energy would have been like handing a baby a firecracker with a lighted fuse.

"What should he have done? Let his secrets die with him? He didn't think so. No one else in his age could have *derived* the knowledge that he did. But it was an age of brilliant men. Leonardo. Michelangelo. There were men capable of *learning* his science, even as men can learn it today. He gathered some of them together and founded this society. It served two purposes. It perpetuated his discoveries and at the same time it maintained the greatest secrecy about them. He urged that the secrets be kept until the time when men could use them safely. The other purpose was to make that time come about as soon as possible."

Crandon looked at Don's unbelieving face. "How can I make you see that it is the truth? Think of the eons that man or manlike creatures have walked the Earth. Think what a small fraction of that time is four hundred years. Is it so strange that atomic energy was discovered a little early, by this displacement in time that is so tiny after all?"

"But by one man," Don argued.

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Crandon shrugged. "Compared with him, Don, you and I are stupid men. So are the scientists who slowly plodded down the same road he had come, stumbling first on one truth and then the succeeding one. We know that inventions and discoveries do not occur at random. Each is based on the one that preceded it. We are all aware of the phenomenon of simultaneous invention. The path to truth is a straight one. It is only our own stupidity that makes it seem slow and tortuous.

"He merely followed the straight path," Crandon finished simply.

DON's incredulity thawed a little. It was not entirely beyond the realm of possibility.

But if it were true! A vast panorama of possible achievements spread before him.

"Four hundred years!" he murmured with awe. "You've had four hundred years' head-start on the rest of the world! What wonders you must have uncovered in that time!"

"Our technical achievements may disappoint you," warned Crandon. "Oh, they're way beyond anything that you are familiar with. You've undoubtedly noticed the shielding material on the reactor. That's a fairly recent development of our metallurgical department. There are other things in the laboratory that I can't even explain to you until you have caught up on the technical basis for understanding them.

"Our emphasis has not been on physical sciences, however, except as they contribute to our central project. We want to change civilization so that it can use physical science without disaster."

For a moment Don had been fired with enthusiasm. But at these words his heart sank.

"Then you've failed," he said bitterly. "In spite of centuries of advance warning, you've failed to change the rest of us enough to prevent us from trying to blow ourselves off the Earth. Here we are, still snarling and snapping at our neighbors' throats—and we've caught up with you. We have the atomic bomb. What's POSAT been doing all that time? Or have you found that human nature really can't be changed?"

"Come with me," said Crandon.

He led the way along the narrow balcony to another door, then down a steep flight of stairs. He opened a door at the bottom, and Don saw what must have been the world's largest computing machine.

"This is our answer," said Crandon. "Oh, rather, it's the tool by which we find our answer.

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For two centuries we have been working on the newest of the sciences—that of human motivation. Soon we will be ready to put some of our new knowledge to work. But you are right in one respect, we are working now against time. We must hurry if we are to save our civilization. That's why you are here. We have work for you to do. Will you join us, Don?"

"But why the hocus-pocus?" asked Don. "Why do you hide behind such a weird front as POSAT? Why do you advertise in magazines and invite just anyone to join? Why didn't you approach me directly, if you have work for me to do? And if you really have the answers to our problems, why haven't you gathered together all the scientists in the world to work on this project —before it's too late?"

Crandon took a sighing breath. "How I wish that we could do just that! But you forget that one of the prime purposes of our organization is to maintain the secrecy of our discoveries until they can be safely disclosed. We must be absolutely certain that anyone who enters this building will have joined POSAT before he leaves. What if we approached the wrong scientist? Centuries of accomplishment might be wasted if they attempted either to reveal it or to exploit it!

"Do you recall the questionnaires that you answered before you were invited here? We fed the answers to this machine and, as a result, we know more about how you will react in any given situation than you do yourself. Even if you should fail to join us, our secrets would be safe with you. Of course, we miss a few of the scientists who might be perfect material for our organization. You'd be surprised, though, at how clever our advertisements are at attracting exactly the men we want. With the help of our new science, we have baited our ads well, and we know how to maintain interest. Curiosity is, to the men we want, a powerful motivator."

"But what about the others?" asked Don. "There must be hundreds of applicants who would be of no use to you at all."

"Oh, yes," replied Crandon. "There are the mild religious fanatics. We enroll them as members and keep them interested by sending pamphlets in line with their interests. We even let them contribute to our upkeep, if they seem to want to. They never get beyond the reception room if they come to call on us. But they are additional people through whom we can act when the time finally comes.

"There are also the desperate people who try POSAT as a last

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resort—lost ones who can't find their direction in life. For them we put into practice some of our newly won knowledge. We rehabilitate them — anonymously, of course. Even find jobs or patch up homes. It's good practice for us.

"I think I've answered most of your questions, Don. But you haven't answered mine. Will you join us?"

Don looked solemnly at the orderly array of the computer before him. He had one more question.

"Will it really work? Can it actually tell you how to motivate the stubborn, quarrelsome, opinionated people one finds on this Earth?"

Crandon smiled. "You're here, aren't you?"

Don nodded, his tense features relaxing.

"Enroll me as a member," he said.

—PHYLLIS STERLING SMITH

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Mr. H. L. Gold, Editor
Galaxy Science Fiction

May 17, 1951

Dear Sir:

Being an occasional reader of Science Fiction, I bought the April, 1951, edition of your magazine. Reading it through I was extremely gratified and pleased to learn of the emphasis many of the stories placed on human relations. "Inside Earth" by Poul Anderson, in particular, handled a human relations theme extremely well. Several of the other stories in the magazine also involved such a theme in one form or another.

On behalf of the Commission on Human Relations I should like to congratulate you for your foresightedness in emphasizing these themes in your stories. I certainly think and I am sure you will agree with me that one of the attributes of a future world, no matter how distant in the future, should be complete understanding among all peoples and all groups and the complete absence of discriminatory practices because of race, creed and national origin that occupy our present-day world. The advantages of the space ships, interplanetary travel, push-button living, and a host of other materialistic features of the time yet to come will be greatly diminished if people cannot learn the spiritual values of understanding decent relations among all groups.

Thanks for doing your part to achieve such an objective.

Sincerely yours,

William Gremley

William H. Gremley
Department of Public Information

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The Biography Project

By DUDLEY DELL

A bonus story . . . scheduled too late to be included on the contents page!

THERE was something tremendously exciting about the opening of the Biofilm Institute. Even a hardened Sunday supplement writer like Wellman Zatz felt it.

Arlington Prescott, a wiper in a contact-eyeglass factory, while searching for a time machine, had invented the Biotime Camera, a standard movie camera — minus sound, of course—that projected a temporal beam, reaccumulated it, and focused it on a temporal-light-sensitized film. When he discovered that he had to be satisfied with merely photographing the past, not physically visiting it, Prescott had quit doing research and become principal of a nursery school.

But, Zatz explained, dictating his notes by persfone to a voxtyper in the telenews office, the Biofilm Institute was based on Prescott's repudiated invention. A huge, massive building, mostly below ground, in the 23rd Century style, and equipped with 1,000 Biotime Cameras, it was the gift of Humboldt Maxwell, wealthy manufacturer of Snack Capsules. There were 1,000 teams of biographers, military analysts, historians, etc., to begin recording history as it actually happened—with special attention, according to Maxwell's grant, to past leaders of industry, politics, science, and the arts, in the order named.

Going through the Biofilm Institute, Wellman Zatz gained mostly curt or snarled interviews with the Bioteams; fishing through time for incidents or persons was a nervous job, and they resented interruptions.

He settled finally on a team that seemed slightly friendlier. They were watching what looked like a scene from Elizabethan England on the monitor screen.

"Sir Isaac Newton," Kelvin Burns, the science biographer,

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grunted in reply to Zatz's question. "Great man. We want to find out why he went off the beam."

Zatz knew about that, of course. Sunday feature articles for centuries had used the case of Sir Isaac to support arguments for psychic phenomena. After making all his astonishing discoveries by the age of 25, the great 17th Century scientist had spent the rest of his long life in a hunt for precognition, the philosopher's stone, and other such paraphernalia of mysticism.

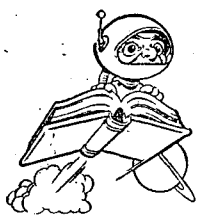
"My guess," said Mowbray Glass, the psychiatrist, "is paranoia caused by feelings of rejection in childhood."

But the screen showed a happy boy in what seemed to be a normal 17th Century home and school environment. Glass grew puzzled as Sir Isaac eventually produced his binomial theorem, differential and integral calculus, and went to work on gravity—all without evidencing any symptoms of emotional imbalance.

"The most unbelievable demonstrative and deductive powers I've encountered," said Pinero Schmidt, the science integrator. "I can't believe such a man could go mystical."

"But he did," Glass said, and tensed. "Look!"

Alone in a dark, cumbersomely furnished study, the man on the



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FRANK A. SCHMID
9 Columbus Circle, New York 19, N. Y.

screen, wearing a satin coat, stock and breeches, glanced up sharply. He looked directly into the temporal beam for a moment, and then stared into the shadows of the room. He grabbed up a silver candlestick and searched the corners, holding the heavy candlestick like a weapon.

"He's mumbling something," reported Gonzalez Carson, the lip-reader. "Spies. He thinks somebody's after his discoveries."

Burns looked puzzled. "That's the first sign we've seen of breakdown. But what caused it?"

"I'm damned if I know," admitted Glass.

"Heredity?" Zatz suggested.

"No," Glass said positively. "It's been checked."

The Bioteam spent hours prying further. When the scientist was in his thirties, he developed a continuing habit of looking up and smiling secretly. On his deathbed, forty years later, he moved his lips happily, without fear.

" 'My guardian angel,' " Carson interpreted for them. " 'You've watched over me all my life. I am content to meet you now.' "

Glass started. He went to one Bioteam after another, asking a brief question of each. When he came back, he was trembling.

"What's the answer, Doc?" Zatz asked eagerly.

"We can't use the Biotime Camera any more," Glass said, looking sick. "My colleagues have been investigating the psychoses of Robert Schumann, Marcel Proust and others, who all eventually developed delusions of persecution."

"Yeah, but why?" Zatz persisted.

"Because they thought they were being spied upon. And they were, of course. By us!"

—DUDLEY DELL

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by

Raymond F. Jones

Just speculate for a moment on the enormous challenge to archeology when interplanetary flight is possible . . . and relics are found of a race extinct for half a million years! A race, incidentally, that was scientifically so far in advance of ours that they held the secret of the restoration of life!

One member of that race can be brought back after 500,000 years of death . . .

That's the story told by this ORIGINAL book-length novel, which has never before been published! You can expect a muscle-tightening, sweat-producing, mind-prodding adventure in the future when you read it!

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